

Innovative New Marion County, FL, High School Opens to Help Students Earn a Diploma Rather than Settling for a GED

"This is a life-changer for those students," Marion Supt. Diane Gullett says of innovative new, free and flexible public high school in Ocala, Florida

OCALA, FLORIDA, UNITED STATES, March 30, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Through a partnership between Marion County public schools and a national network of high school dropout re-engagement programs, students grappling with challenges that have sidetracked their educational aspirations have a new place to earn their diplomas through a flexible, personalized and free-of-charge course of study.

[Marion County Acceleration Academies](#)

recently hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony featuring Marion County Schools Supt. Dr. Diane Gullett and

Acceleration Academies Co-founders Dr. Joseph Wise and Mark Graves. They were joined by educators and the students — who are called "graduation candidates" to remind them of their goal — who are taking advantage of the new program to get their high school careers back on track.

"We are so excited to work with Dr. Gullett and her colleagues to provide a different path for young people who need a non-traditional way to earn their high school diploma and the brighter future it can bring," said Graves. "As our growing number of graduates can attest, having the chance to pursue a personalized path to graduation enables young people to — as our motto says — #OwnYourSuccess."



Marion County school leaders joined Acceleration Academies founders to cut the ribbon on a new public high school offering students a flexible, personalized way to earn their diplomas

Supt. Gullett said she is “so grateful” for the new school. “Acceleration is an example of what choice is all about and providing an opportunity to meet students where they are. This is a life-changer for those students — not just for their futures but for their future families.”

She added that Marion County Acceleration Academies Director Wayne Livingston “truly believes in the future.” Livingston said during the ceremony the school welcomes students with “warm hearts (and) open hearts,” according to a feature article about the school published by the [Ocala StarBanner](#).



At Marion County Acceleration Academies, students get as much one-on-one personal tutoring as they need

Marion County students are finding success through the flexible, personalized approach provided by an agreement between the public school system and Acceleration Academies. The Marion County campus is led by Livingston, a track standout at the University of Florida, father of two and veteran educator in Marion County public schools.

“

In the months of being here, I have felt seen and I have felt heard — something I’ve never felt in any other place. Now I know the future remains hopeful and bright.”

*Acceleration Academies
graduation candidate Mako
Velez*

“I appreciate that Marion County school officials support this idea,” says Livingston, who worked 35 years as a special education teacher, sports coach and school principal before signing on to lead the new school, which currently has 230 students and is growing rapidly. “Our mission is really simple: give the graduation candidates another chance. Let them take ownership, as opposed to saying ‘You failed in a traditional setting. It’s too late, it’s over.’”

Mako Velez is a strong student from a family that values education. Until she found Marion County Acceleration Academies, though, she had begun to wonder if a high school diploma was within her grasp.

“Education is really important in my family,” says Velez, who is the youngest of three children born to Mexican immigrants. “My parents moved here for a better life. They want to see us succeed. And to them, education is the first step in succeeding in life.”

But she found the structure of traditional school — arriving early in the morning, juggling multiple courses, and navigating classrooms where teachers lacked the time to provide as much one-on-one support as she wanted — discouraging. She dropped out but then decided to try Marion County Acceleration Academies.

Here, she found a quiet, studious environment, the chance to focus on one course at a time and get the support needed to regain her stride. Now she is close to graduating and pursuing further education and a career as an artist and graphic designer.



Marion County Acceleration Academies offers a cafe-style atmosphere where students can gather in small groups to study and get personalized support from licensed teachers

“Before coming here I had already given up on graduating high school and on top of that I had given up on my life,” Velez told the audience gathered at the ribbon-cutting. “Every night I’d stare up at my ceiling and ask myself the question, ‘Is this really a way to live?’ And to answer that, no, it isn’t a way to live. Acceleration Academy gave me what seemed like a second chance.”

“Acceleration Academy has shown that they try to create a comfortable environment for everyone and they want us to succeed. In the months of being here, I have felt seen and I have felt heard — something I’ve never felt in any other place,” Velez continued. “Now I know the future remains hopeful and bright ... I cannot express through words how grateful I am.”

Marion County Acceleration Academies is located at 1515 E. Silver Springs Blvd, Unit 222 in the Cascades complex on Hwy. 40 in Ocala. It is part of a growing nationwide network of Acceleration Academies, which operates 17 campuses in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, Kansas, Nevada and Washington State.

The academies re-engage students who have struggled in traditional schools for a variety of reasons, including the need for the flexibility to work full-time or care for young children; the need for more one-on-one attention; or a desire to accelerate their studies in order to graduate early and move forward with plans for college, military service, work or careers in professional sports. To meet such needs, Acceleration Academies provide a blend of independent online study and in-person academic, social and emotional support.

Like all public school programs, MCAA is free of charge and open to students up to age 21 who want to earn their high school diploma rather than settling for a GED. [Education Week](#) recently featured the network in a special report on re-engaging students after the pandemic. Find more

information at: accelerationacademies.org

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