

Second chances: Alternative school team keeps kids out of trouble

By Andrew Petersen | **No comments posted**

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Kimberly Center basketball players meet with coaches at the alternative high school in Davenport. (Jeff Cook/Quad-City Times)

They've got an experienced coach, an unblemished record and a series of YouTube videos.

Cheerleaders, fans and a home gym still are a ways off, but that is of little importance to a team that didn't exist a year ago.

The boys on the first basketball team at Kimberly Center have

an opportunity. As students at Davenport's alternative high school, they've been given second chances, but most never figured they would get a single crack at high school ball.

"To me, it's a big step we took," junior Michael Roberts said. "I'm playing with kids I grew up with. I wasn't sure if I was going to play or not. I played in middle school.

"It feels pretty good to be back out there."

The Panthers are one of four teams in an upstart group of alternative high schools across eastern Iowa. They join Cedar Rapids Metro, Marion Linn-Mar Compass and Clinton's Lincoln High School as founding members of a league that officials hope can expand.

A few years removed from a 20-year stint as an assistant at Davenport North, longtime Kimberly Center teacher Jim Wessel coaches the Panthers.

The team practices twice a week and plays a game each weekend, but Wessel doesn't coddle his players. They run drills in practice and know how to fall into a man-to-man defense as well as a 2-3 zone.

And the results on the court have been encouraging.

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Kimberly Center was 3-0 entering Wednesday, driven largely by quick guards who run a punishing fast break.

But Wessel hopes for even more progress.

"The kids that go to school here have had their issues at West, Central and North," he said. "That's why they're here.

"We really try to sell them on sportsmanship and making good decisions."

Kimberly Center students are eligible to participate in athletics with their original school, and many do.

Several boys played football at one of the three traditional Davenport schools. Guard Antonio Perkins began the season playing for West.

The Kimberly Center team has 16 players out of the school's 289 students. Wessel said a few have joined since the season began in January, filling the void for those who have left — a primary concern in the classroom as well.

Panthers sophomore Jake Owen doesn't shy away from what he sees as the team's biggest benefit.

"It keeps us out of trouble," he said. "I definitely know it keeps me out of trouble."

Out of trouble and in school.

The basketball team is one of a growing number of tools the school uses to combat dropouts.

Donations led to a new weight room at Kimberly Center, which coincided with the school's first year offering physical education.

To trumpet the basketball team's accomplishments, highlight videos of the Panthers' games can be found on Web site [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

In December, the school had a "Guitar Hero" video game tournament.

"If there's a way to hook them, we want to do it," associate principal Charlie Driscoll said. "We want to give them a reason to want to stay in school."

And at least through February, officials are optimistic basketball can help with that.

Wessel is careful not to overwhelm his squad. While he wants to see improvement, he shudders at the thought of burnout.

"We're not as organized, we're not as good as any of the other (Davenport) schools," Wessel said. "But as far as the pressure of the every-day program, we don't have that."

Which keeps kids coming back.

An alternative team requires alternative treatment, Driscoll said.

So it's not "no pass, no play," a policy embraced by other high school teams across Iowa. As long as Kimberly Center students "consistently attend" school, they are allowed to play in their recreational league.

That standard might be one of several changes in the future.

The league aims to expand beyond its 11-game schedule and grow beyond four teams.

But there is no hurry. Not when the positive effects are only just starting to be realized.

"A lot of guys came in disrespectful," Roberts said. "But we're learning about others.

"This is our home."

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