

**Mike Schack EMBA '04** knows that for a young person who's struggling, the right kind of support can mean the difference between success and failure.

That's why he's worked hard to create a loving and supportive environment at Joseph Academy, the school he founded to serve youth with severe behavioral, emotional, and learning disabilities.

Admission isn't for just anyone. A young person can't be referred to unless her or she has a slew of preexisting issues, Schack says. And once they're teenagers, many have already faced trouble with drugs, gangs, violence, and more.

"The Chicago Tribune said, 'Nobody else wants the kids that go to Joseph,'" he says.

Schack, though, is up for the challenge. He has had a long career of working with youth, first as teacher at a boys' residential school in Chicago, then as a developer of special schools all around the state of Illinois. When the opportunity arose to start his own school, he jumped at it, founding Joseph Academy, a nonprofit therapeutic day school, in 1983.

The school has served some 4,000 students and grown to include two other campuses in the Chicago suburbs. And it's making a difference by helping give young people the skills they need to succeed.

### **Building Skills and Self-Confidence**

"Part of the problem with kids that are in trouble is that they don't think much of themselves, for whatever reason, for whatever complications they've had in their lives," Schack says. "So we try to treat them with dignity, smile and talk nicely, and try to build confidence and hope. We have a phrase: we're four to one. We try to say or do four positive things and then talk about an issue, problem, or behavior that isn't good for them, their family, their school, or their future."

Despite using a strategy centered around affirmation and constructive criticism, teachers and faculty can still have a hard time reaching students who have been through so much, Schack says: "Sometimes they're not able to accept feedback because they so much want to do well, and they have a whole experience in life of not doing well."

Joseph Academy's answer to students' lack of self-confidence? Providing them ample opportunities to learn what it feels like to do well.

"We use school, sports, vocational training, therapy, field trips—all of those we use as vehicles to catch them being good and to point out to them the things they can do well and to avoid the things that are going to pull them down and create problems in their life," Schack says.

### **Changing Lives**

While not foolproof, this program has helped turn around the lives of many kids who found themselves on the wrong path.

“Some years ago I got a call from a former student who just wanted to let me know that he appreciated what we did,” Schack says. “He was married and had some kids, and was working as a Chicago fireman.”

In addition to hearing success stories from graduates, he has seen young people make significant progress in the few years they’ve been at Joseph Academy.

“We have a young lady who gave a report the other day,” Schack says. “She’s a junior in high school now, but when she was 15, she was into drugs, already pregnant, and running away from her home. Now she’s working part-time, her mom’s helping her take care of her baby, and she’s got this year to finish school. She’s doing well, and she’s taking care of herself.”

Schack is grateful for the support he’s receiving from fellow Mendoza graduates who are serving on Joseph Academy’s new junior board and helping to raise awareness of the school’s mission. And he recognizes how much of his own career he owes to those who have helped him along the way, including his his wife and his parents.

In his work, Schack says, he’s simply tried to help others who didn’t receive the same resources and opportunities that he’s had.

“That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?” he says. “Didn’t Jesus say, ‘Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me?’”

*To learn more about the work Joseph Academy does to teach life-changing skills to young people with behavioral, emotional and learning disorders, please visit [josephacademy.org](http://josephacademy.org).*