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Programs aim to cut dropouts

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Keeping struggling kids in class is a challenge most schools confront, and a local nonprofit is getting help from a national group to tackle the issue here.

Albuquerque-based nonprofit Youth Development Inc. is using a nationally recognized model to help students at risk of dropping out of high school and a related program to help those who have already dropped out.

The two programs, Quantum and Argus, are funded by the nonprofit Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which works on projects to improve inner cities and help disadvantaged children, youths and families. The cost has been about \$350,000 for the past two years.

The programs are new to Albuquerque, one of 14 cities chosen to host both. The programs are in the second year of a three-year funding cycle.

Quantum helps kids who are in school but deemed at risk of dropping out, while Argus is for dropouts.

Eisenhower Foundation president and CEO Alan Curtis said his group chose to fund YDI because "it has experience targeting 'multiple solutions' to the same geographic area."

"Quantum seeks to improve grades and keep youth in high school. But if they do drop out, Argus gets them back on track, with GEDs, job training and job placement."

The kids in the Argus and Quantum programs are primarily from West Mesa and Rio Grande high schools.

YDI associate director Concha Cordova, who oversees the two programs, said YDI has run the Stay in School Program for 23 years, but funding has always been limited.

Argus is designed to not only get kids a GED but to train them in a trade.

"We found that getting their GED was really not good enough," Cordova said. "We give them workforce readiness skills that they don't have."

She said Argus trains students in two green areas: weatherization, with an 80-hour course geared at the home and commercial building industry; and photovoltaic technology, a 160-hour course that prepares students to work with solar panel installation and maintenance.

Adan Bencomo, 17, is in the Argus program and studying to get his GED. He dropped out of 10th grade at Rio Grande in 2008, but after working and getting into some trouble, he decided to continue his education.

"This is strictly my decision," Bencomo said. "I'm feeling good about it."

He said he wants to begin studying psychology at Central New Mexico Community College after he gets his GED.

Guillermo Bustillos, 16, is a West Mesa sophomore enrolled in Quantum. He recently traveled to Washington, D.C., with a YDI classmate and met with members of New Mexico's congressional delegation.

"It helps me with my homework, it helps me with my grades," he said of Quantum. "I will be in the program until I graduate from high school. I'm glad it's part of my life."

Info on programs

Quantum

- The goal is to bring students up to grade level, increase graduation rates, increase likelihood of post-secondary education, reduce truancy, reduce delinquency, crime, drug use and other problem behaviors.
- YDI tracks grades, school attendance and other aspects of the program. An Eisenhower Foundation evaluator reviews surveys about social behavior, attitude, improved family life, involvement in crime and/or drugs.

Argus

- Goals include improved social skills, attitudes and behavior, improved job skills and readiness, job placement for part-time and summer and for internships and increased educational attainment.

- YDI tracks attendance in classes and other program/leadership activities, conducts pre- and post-tests to determine academic achievement and completion of advanced training classes through CNM. An Eisenhower Foundation evaluator looks at improved social behavior and family life and other factors through surveys.

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