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Proven programs can give the poor chance at success

By VERNON DELPESCE and ALAN CURTIS

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The Iowa Department of Education recently announced good news regarding the 2005 graduation rates in Des Moines public schools. Almost 80 percent of teens in Des Moines finish high school, a number that far surpasses the national average.

Many of those who don't graduate come from poor families and face other socio-economic impediments. What can be done to increase the graduation rate and help dropouts get their lives back on track?

Most youth who drop out of school do so between the ninth and 10th grades, during the difficult transition into high school. We also know that many at-risk youth lack the support they need at home.

At the YMCA of Greater Des Moines, we provide some of that support, but we can increase it by partnering with the Eisenhower Foundation, based in Washington, D.C.

For more than 25 years, the Eisenhower Foundation has replicated and evaluated what works for the truly disadvantaged around the nation. There are three proven programs that the YMCA and the foundation would like to bring to Des Moines:

Quantum opportunities

This program selects high school students ranked at the bottom of their freshman class and works with them intensively over the four years of high school. The key to Quantum's success is an individualized computer software package that allows students to begin at their current reading or math level and catch up quickly. Adult mentors also work one on one with each student in a supportive environment, away from peers who may exert negative pressure.

Programming continues through the summer and vacations, when youth tend to be idle and most at risk.

Quantum's results demonstrate that adolescents from poor families can benefit greatly from a program that combines academic tutoring, computer-based learning, stipends, savings toward college, caring adult supervision, community service, life-skills training and alcohol- and drug-abuse awareness training.

Argus learning for living

This program for high school dropouts enjoyed great success a decade ago in Des Moines at the John R. Grubb YMCA.

According to an Eisenhower Foundation evaluation, people in Argus job training and placement were significantly less likely to be on public assistance, on drugs or arrested — compared to those not enrolled in Argus.

The United States is the only advanced industrial democracy without a well-thought-out job-training program for the truly disadvantaged. Iowa needs to lead the way — to put job training back on the agenda for state and national legislatures. Argus is a good model for that legislation.

Delancey Street

Iowa ranks a close second, behind Wisconsin, in Black Commentator's "Worst Places to Be Black" report on imprisonment of African-Americans. Iowa incarcerates blacks at a rate 11.6 times that of whites.

That is why the Eisenhower Foundation and the YMCA are exploring with Spectrum Resources in Des Moines the possibility of replicating Delancey Street in Iowa. Begun in San Francisco over 35 years ago, Delancey Street is arguably the most successful enterprise in the nation for reintegrating, educating, training and placing ex-offenders in jobs with upward mobility.

Delancey Street is an entrepreneurial model in which the residents manage a variety of enterprises. That provides hands-on training and generates enough revenue to make the organization self sustaining. The business-training schools at Delancey Street in San Francisco include a three star restaurant, a moving and trucking company, a café/bookstore/art gallery, automotive and coach services, and Christmas-tree sales. The training businesses generate \$4 million a year in revenues.

There is no reason why we can't assure that every young person in Des Moines has a real chance at success. We know what works. To replicate these solutions, we need strong partnerships between foundations like Eisenhower, nonprofits like the YMCA, the public and private sectors and everyday citizens.

The work of such partnerships will strengthen not only families but also the entire community.

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