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A Youth Program That Worked

Editorial

A random group of adolescents from welfare families can benefit greatly from an academic program that includes disciplined training, a stipend, money towards college and caring adult supervisors. That is the lesson of a Ford Foundation-financed program described in the Times recently by Celia Dugger.

The 100 teen-agers who participated from 1989 to 1993 graduated from high school, went on to college, avoided childbearing and escaped involvement with the criminal justice system at a greater rate than did a comparable control group. The program's success offers hopeful lessons for budget cutting politicians and pessimists who think no intervention can change the downward trajectory of poor youths.

The experiment, called the Quantum Opportunities Program, is especially encouraging because the participants were not special or self-selected. The 25 participants at each of four sites -- Philadelphia, Oklahoma City, San Antonio and Saginaw, Michigan -- were randomly chosen from lists of students entering ninth grade whose families were on welfare. They were rough kids from rough neighborhoods. Some were killed or landed in prison.

Those who stuck it out were required to participate year-round in academic tutorial and computer skills training, community service, and life skills training, like alcohol and drug abuse awareness and family planning.

Students were given a stipend of \$1.33 for each hour they participated. For every 100 hours, they received \$100 bonus payments and an amount equal to their total earnings, which accrued toward college or post-secondary training. The financial rewards became an incentive for students to continue in the program and welcome extra income for financially strapped families. Over four years, students spent an average of nearly 1,300 hours in program activities. The average cost per participant was \$10,600.

Many of the program's lessons went beyond books. Students were taken to museums, plays and concerts. The adult supervisors, from the Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America, became not just mentors, but surrogate parents or family members, with roots in the same community.

By the end of the program, 63 percent of the Quantum Opportunities Program participants graduated from high school, 42 percent were enrolled in a post-secondary program. 23 percent dropped out of school, 24 percent had children and 7 percent had arrest records. By contrast, of the control group, 42 percent finished high school, 16 percent went on to post-secondary schools, 50 percent dropped out, 38 percent had children and 13 percent had arrest records.

The Labor Department and the Ford Foundation will test the program in a larger demonstration of about 700 participants in five sites starting in September. Even as budget-cutters prepare to slash funds for youth development and job training, the success of the program shows that careful investments in disadvantaged youth can work.