
Training First, Not Work First

When it comes to jobs for the truly disadvantaged, we need to train the poor first — to provide them with the educational and work skills needed for good jobs with upward mobility. There are a number of examples of scientifically evaluated success when it comes to training first programs. Perhaps the most successful program is Job Corps, begun in the 1960s as part of the Great Society. Other positively evaluated training successes include YouthBuild USA nationally, the Center for Employment and Training in San Jose, CA and the Argus Community Learning for Living Center in the South Bronx.

For example, the Eisenhower Foundation has successfully replicated the Argus training first program. Argus combines “tough love” to turn around attitudes, remedial education, job training for jobs in actual local demand, job placement and job retention follow-up. The Foundation’s replication of Argus in the Washington, DC area trains dropouts for good jobs repairing telecommunications equipment. The evaluation showed higher earnings and less crime by the trainees vis-a-vis a comparison group.

By contrast, there is little evidence that “work first” has succeeded. As a strategy, “work first” initially was tried in the 1980s through the Job Training Partnership Act — which was the primary federal job initiative for disadvantaged adults and high school dropouts, many of whom were welfare recipients. Evaluations consistently showed that the Job Training Partnership Act failed. It did not create jobs. It did not undertake much training. The training that was undertaken was superficial.

The economic expansion of the 1990’s, not “work first” welfare “reform,” was primarily responsible for the decline in poverty and caseloads over the last decade, just as a slow economy became the main force behind the increase in poverty (and crime) at the beginning of the new millennium. Solid research evidence supports this conclusion.

