



Class Struggle

by Jay Mathews

Jay Mathews writes an on-line education column, "Class Struggle," for the Washington Post (<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/class-struggle/>). This morning's column is on MDRC's recent report with early results on youth ChalleNGe.

Grabbing Dropouts Early

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I am an optimist, maybe too much of one. I believe, for instance, that our school dropout problem in many instances takes care of itself. Often teenagers leave school because they just cannot bear sitting in class. Eventually they mature, return to school, graduate and have productive lives. Data show that of the 30 percent of students who do not graduate on time, about half have acquired high school diplomas or General Educational Development certificates (GED) by their late 20s.

Many people find my congenial sunniness on this and other issues annoying. My wife, who married me nearly 42 years ago, has always called me "the Pollyanna From Hell." She might have a point. Optimism can lead to error. For instance, I have found a impressive new report on dropouts that suggests my laissez faire attitude toward the issue might keep many young people from being yanked back into school in ways that would do them good.

I had never heard of the program described in the report, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, even though 75,000 young people in half of the 50 states have gone through it since the early 1990s. It has a definite military flavor that might be off-putting to the scholars whose work on dropouts I usually read. This hard look by MDRC, a highly regarded nonprofit research organization, indicates that ChalleNGe works well, at least in the initial stages. MDRC is doing a long-term study with funds from the Defense Department and these foundations: Bill and Melinda Gates, Charles Stewart Mott, Edna McConnell Clark, John D. and Catherine MacArthur, MCI, Robert Wood Johnson and William and Flora

Hewlett. This first report is available at mdrc.org.

Nine months after 2,320 recent dropouts enrolled in the program, they were much more likely to have earned a high school diploma or GED than the 754 dropouts in a control group who applied for the program but were not selected in a random lottery because there was not enough space for everyone. That randomized selection is rare, and much valued, in education research. It suggests that if the two groups follow significantly different paths after their selection, the reason is likely the program, not their personal characteristics. Forty-six percent of the program group had earned a diploma or GED compared with 10 percent of the control group. Higher percentages of people in the program group were working or going to college than in the control group. The program group members also reported better health and were less likely to have been arrested.

In a column last July I praised an MDRC report on career academies showing they had a particularly good effect on the life habits of young men. The ChalleNGe program is also mostly about guys. In the first two phases of the program, participants spend 22 weeks living at program sites, often on a military base. They are called cadets, divided into platoons and squads, live in barracks, have their hair cut short, wear uniforms and are subject to military-style discipline. To get into the program, you have to be 16 to 18, unemployed, drug-free and, as the report puts it, "not heavily involved with the justice system." Another condition: You must be a dropout or an expelled student. Females may apply. There is no military obligation attached to the program. But 80

percent of the participants, and of the control group, are male.

The positive results in this initial stage suggest that my notion of letting nature take its course might not be as effective in rescuing dropouts as giving them a chance to be reminded every day how important it is to get their stuff together. The participants and non-participants being followed by MDRC are 41 percent non-Hispanic white, 40 percent non-Hispanic black and the rest Hispanic. Only 23 percent lived with both biological parents when they entered the study, but fewer than a third reported their families receiving any kind of public assistance.

The program lasts 17 months, in three phases. There is a two-week orientation followed by a 20-week residential phase and a one-year, post-residential phase. The residential phase curriculum leans heavily on eight core components with these labels: leadership/followership; responsible citizenship; service to community; life-coping skills; physical fitness; health and hygiene; job skills; and academic excellence. Toward the end of that phase, participants choose a post-residential placement, usually a job (about 57 percent), school (about 27 percent) or military service (about 12 percent), according to the ChalleNGe Program.

Educators who think our school system is already designed to equip the Army with recruits and corporations with compliant workers will not like this approach. Others will. The question is how much better the program group will do than the control group as more time passes. Stay tuned. I am optimistic I will have another column on this as soon as the next report comes out.