

Discipline of Military Redirects Dropouts

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FORT GORDON, Ga. — By his own account, Donte' A. Dungey had no motivation in high school, sleeping through classes and sometimes showing up only for the free lunch to reduce the burden on his mother, who was struggling with nine other children. Held back three times and scheduled to enter the 10th grade at nearly 18, he knew that “high school just wasn’t going to work for me,” he said.

But he was also ready to change. More than five months ago, Mr. Dungey took up residence in a program for dropouts called Youth Challenge, run by the National Guard, that is proving effective at using military atmosphere and discipline to turn around at-risk teenagers.

Mr. Dungey is one of 203 youths who graduated from a grueling physical and educational program on Saturday. Here at one of two Youth Challenge camps in Georgia, he rose at 4:30 a.m. each day, made his bunk with neat corners and sweated through an hour of calisthenics or running.

He has worn a uniform, marched in step with his platoon to the dining hall, completed 50 hours of community service, and spent long hours studying for the General

Educational Development diploma that opens the door to college or career training for dropouts. The camp bars cigarettes and alcohol.

“It feels good to have discipline,” Mr. Dungey said. Sooner than most of his fellow cadets, he passed the G.E.D. exams and began tutoring others. Like all the youths, he has a personally selected adult mentor in his hometown who will advise him over the year ahead, and this one-time aimless school dropout now hopes to join the Air Force.

President Obama’s urgent call for every student to graduate and receive higher training has put a new spotlight on programs like the Job Corps, the government’s education and career-training program; YouthBuild, a group that helps dropouts earn G.E.D. certificates as they rebuild urban housing; and the smaller Youth Challenge program, which graduates more than 7,000 teenagers each year — a large majority of them male — from sites in 28 states.

The early results of a national study comparing youths who qualified for the program and were then admitted or denied on a random basis suggest that Youth Challenge may be the most successful large-scale program yet evaluated to help dropouts.

Nine months after participants left the program, they were 36 percent more likely than those in the control group to have obtained a G.E.D. or a high school degree. They were more than three times as likely to be attending college and 9 percent more likely to be working full time.

No one calls the program a panacea, but it has generated excitement among researchers because “the impacts are pretty large,” said Harry J. Holzer, a labor and poverty expert at Georgetown University. “So few interventions have proven to be cost-effective for the out-of-school, disadvantaged youth population when rigorously evaluated.”

Dan Bloom of MDRC, a research group based in New York that is leading the study, said, “It’s very promising, but it’s also early,” adding that the numbers will change as graduates are followed.

The camps, mostly at military bases, do not admit youths with felony records and expel those who fail a drug test, steal or fight. Participation is voluntary.

Usually about 20 percent of entrants drop out, mainly in the first two weeks. On average at Fort Gordon, 78 percent of those completing the five and a half months in residence obtain a G.E.D., said Janet Zimmerman, a retired Army colonel who runs the camp.

“By taking them away from their neighborhoods, we’re giving them a safe place to get their act together,” Colonel Zimmerman said. “These youths have been told they are failures. Here they find that if they straighten up, others will believe in them.”

Nationally, about half the graduates have gone directly into jobs, but a question facing this and other training programs is how much harder it will be to find work in this economy. More graduates may instead seek further training or try to join the military, although the standards for enlistment are rising, too, and not all graduates are taken.

In recent years, only 15 percent to 20 percent of Youth Challenge graduates have entered the armed services or the National Guard. “This is not a military recruitment program,” said Jennifer Buck, the deputy secretary of defense for reserve affairs, who oversees the program. It was founded by Congress in 1993 to make use of the military’s experience in shaping up young people. The routines have a military cast, though the rigors are short of a real boot camp and there is no training in weapons or tactics.

“The dropout rate is as great a threat to this country as terrorism is,” Ms. Buck said, justifying the use of defense money for the program — \$88.5 million this year, with the states adding another \$50 million. The National Guard, rooted in the states and with a tradition of community service, is an ideal home for the program, Ms. Buck said.

The quasi-military approach is not best for every errant youth. Connie Flanagan, a psychologist and professor of youth civic development at Pennsylvania State University, said the group cohesion in Youth Challenge, the emphasis on controlling anger and the immediate feedback on behavior all seemed to be useful elements.

“On the other hand, the real world doesn’t have those kinds of support systems,” she said. “As a next step, the kids have to learn to think for themselves, and we usually don’t think of the military approach as a way to learn autonomy and self-determination.” Ideally, she said, the civilian mentoring, which is supposed to continue after the camp, can help with the transition.

But for the right person, Youth Challenge seems to work. Branden Williams, 22, of Augusta finished the camp at Fort Gordon in 2005.

“I was headed down the wrong path, skipping school, doing drugs,” he said. “Youth Challenge changed my life totally.”

“All my friends are either locked up or dead,” Mr. Williams said, “and that’s where I would have ended up.” He decided he needed to do something radical after he was stabbed eight times on a school bus.

After gaining his G.E.D., he attended a culinary arts school for two years, thinking he might be a chef. Now, promoted to assistant manager at a Checkers Drive-In, he is taking a business administration course at a junior college and hopes to manage a restaurant.

But the lure of old neighborhoods can persist. One of his closest buddies in the camp has found little work and, Mr. Williams recently learned, was arrested on drug charges.

“I never thought he’d backtrack,” Mr. Williams said.