

Program to Help At-Risk Youths Needs Continued Support

By State Rep. Pam Thornburg

A promising pilot program that encourages at-risk high school students to stay in school and make a successful transition to the working world needs the continued support of state budget writers.

The Career Transition Project (CTP) was developed in neighboring Maryland and has since been replicated in several other states. In brief, its intent is to link students to occupational experiences, showing them how their classroom studies are applicable to getting and keeping a job. I was one of a group of officials that actively advocated in support of testing the concept here.

A pilot of the CTP was launched in June 2006 at The Central School in Wilmington, one of the state's Intensive Learning Centers (ILCs) that specializes in the education of students with behavioral and developmental challenges.

The children attending the ILCs are the archetype for at-risk youths. They typically struggle in traditional education settings and are statistically at a far greater risk of dropping out of school, being unemployed and facing lives mired in poverty. They are also more likely to abuse controlled substances, experience health issues, become dependent on social welfare programs, and have brushes with criminal justice system.

The CTP model stresses career exploration, individualized planning for students, mentoring, and enhanced academic instruction that incorporates career concepts into core subjects. The program also utilizes aptitude testing in an attempt to gauge a student's interests and skills, matching them with suitable occupations, post-secondary education and training opportunities.

In addition to the CTP's other aspects, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation employs a counselor to work with students, enrolling them for appropriate services at the end of their junior year and working with them to craft individual employment plans.

Of the 124 students at The Central School (grades 9 through 12) 75 chose to take part in the program. The results have been startling.

In the three years (2003-2006) before the CTP pilot at The Central School, students had a 10 percent dropout rate. According to a recent assessment of the pilot program (June 2006 to December 2008), only four of the 75 participating

students dropped out during the 30-month assessment period – an annual rate of just two-percent.

During the 2007-2008 school year, five of 10 eligible students were hired by businesses ranging from Pinnacle Energy to Hickory Farms and Gallucio's Restaurant. While that may seem modest, these results are noteworthy because students in previous years had not secured any jobs.

The CTP's cost-effectiveness has been as surprising as its results. The assessment reported only \$80,000 in outside funding was needed annually to sustain the program, which benefited from the use of existing resources and support of participating agencies.

Supporters of the CTP note that there is room for improvement including expanded mentoring; a more expansive integration of the program with traditional curriculum; and improving the academic performance of ILC students, who lag well behind their mainstream peers.

With current funding, the CTP pilot will run through next summer at the Central School. Given the results, I believe we need to budget the money needed to sustain and fine-tune the effort with an eye towards future expansion.

While finding even this comparatively small amount of funding will be a challenge in the current fiscal reality, I submit it's an investment in reducing future, higher costs. Helping at-risk youths to make the successful transition to the working world will reduce or eliminate their reliance on state services and programs, ultimately improving their lives and saving significant taxpayer money.

As we look towards the next budget, it's clear that lawmakers and the Markell administration will be faced with some very difficult choices. As a new member of the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, I believe we need to base those choices on value. Programs that provide taxpayers with a good return on their investment should be given preference over those that have failed to fulfill their promise.

The Career Transition Project has demonstrated it's worthy of our faith and support.

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