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Reshaping High Schools Pages 28-34

About-Face!

Quasi-military public high schools offer a safe environment, academic excellence—and a surprising focus on the whole child.

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Last fall, the *Washington Post* ran a dispiriting set of articles about Coolidge High School in Washington, D.C. The articles caught my eye because Coolidge is my alma mater, circa 1959. The stories featured a student who was bright but unmotivated and perpetually skating on thin ice academically, well-intentioned parents who were clueless about the fact that their son frequently skipped class, teachers who struggled to capture the attention of their students and maintain order in the classroom, and a central school administration so inept that it routinely registered students in courses that they had already passed. According to one 12th grader,

Coolidge is just like a zombie zone. You see these kids walking in the hallway; that's because they have no other choice. Because they feel like when they're in class, the teachers don't connect, and you don't want to feel dumb. (Parker, 2007)

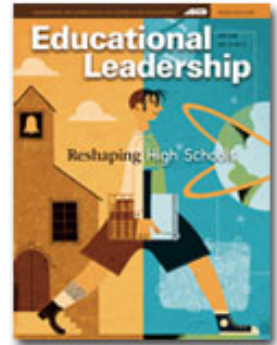
A Coolidge social sciences teacher offered a similarly downbeat appraisal: "The classes are not going anywhere, and the students are not going anywhere" (Parker, 2007).

Federal and state reform efforts have yet to change the Coolidge High Schools of America. Far from leaving no child behind, the mantra of these deeply flawed schools seems to be survival of the most resilient.

It does little good to point the finger of blame at students, parents, communities, educators, or schools. But it also makes no sense to perpetuate the mismatch between what these schools offer and what their students need. For the millions of youngsters who are faring miserably in public schools as we know them, we urgently need new approaches.

Military Alternatives

The U.S. military is one promising place to look for insights and ideas. After all, the military enjoys a well-deserved reputation for reaching, teaching, and training young people who were rudderless. What's more, for many years various branches of the military have either operated or collaborated with public schools in operating alternative schools, schools within schools, extracurricular programs, and youth corps for dropouts.



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A Residential Program for Dropouts

For example, in 1993 the National Guard launched the Youth ChalleNGe Program (<http://new.ngycp.org>), which aims to get high school dropouts back on track. This 22-week residential program for 16- to 18-year-olds typically operates on underused military bases. It strives to help young people make basic lifestyle changes. Participants (cadets) engage in a rigorous program of physical development, education, and community service (see below). They are matched with mentors who help them complete the program and continue to provide support after cadets graduate from the residential phase.

Since its inception, ChalleNGe has served nearly 75,000 participants. According to independent assessments conducted for the National Guard, the outcomes are heartening. In just 22 weeks, the graduates gain an average of 1.5 grades in reading and 2.2 grades in math. Of the most recent 7,000 graduates, roughly 58 percent were employed, and 26 percent returned to high school or enrolled in vocational school or college. Just over 12 percent joined the military (Brookings Institution, 2007).

What's especially striking about ChalleNGe is the transformation it often produces in the lives of previously troubled youth. As one grateful parent remarked,

My son lost interest in school because he didn't understand; therefore he was retained in 9th grade for the 3rd time. He was hanging around the wrong crowd, smoking and drinking and had very bad anger toward me, his mother. Being a single mom I had to work and lost control over him. My son started Youth ChalleNGe in Fort Stewart, Georgia, in January 2004. When I picked him up on his pass for the weekend, I couldn't believe that I picked up the same child that I had dropped off. He was courteous, seemed so grown up, even told me "Mom, I realize I'm becoming a man." (National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, 2006)

Public Military Academies

Another intriguing innovation is public military academies. Several school districts have created full-fledged schools or schools within schools in the image of the military. Public military academies exist in Oakland, California; Richmond, Virginia; St. Louis, Missouri; Wilmington, Delaware; and Prince George's County, Maryland. Chicago has four such academies; Philadelphia has two. The demand for slots is robust. This year, 7,500 students applied for 700 openings in Chicago; 2,000 applicants competed for 250 slots in Philadelphia (Brookings Institution, 2007). These academies are subject to the same curricular and testing requirements as other public schools. They tend to steer clear of both the brightest and the most troubled youngsters. In the Philadelphia academies, 10 percent of the enrollees qualify for special education.

The available data on the effects of public military academies paint an encouraging picture. For example, the Chicago Military Academy in Bronzeville ranked in the top quarter of all public high schools in the city. Its academic performance resembled that of a magnet school, even though the majority of its 150 students were recruited from the surrounding low-income neighborhood. Fifty-one percent of the academy's cadets performed at or above national norms

in reading, and 62 percent did so in math. These scores exceeded the citywide average in reading by 40 percent and in math by 30 percent (Quintanilla, 2000). Of the 98 seniors in the academy's first graduating class, 85 were accepted into college; they received more than \$1 million in grants and scholarships (Trejos, 2003).

In Philadelphia, the academies' average daily attendance rate of 93 percent outshines the districtwide average of 81 percent. The academies' teacher absentee rate of less than 1 percent surpasses the districtwide rate of 8 percent and attests to the teachers' desire to work in this distinctive environment (Brookings Institution, 2007).

Last December, I visited the Philadelphia Military Academy/Leeds, which shares a nondescript building with a middle school. The atmosphere of the academy was refreshingly kid-friendly, with plenty of easygoing banter among the cadets. Faculty and students interacted effortlessly yet respectfully. Four JROTC instructors, all black men, served as counselors and mentors for the youngsters, who had their cell phone numbers. The principal kept his door open, and students streamed in throughout the day to chat with him.

Classrooms at Philadelphia Military Academy were a revelation. The teachers, all of whom are certified, were relaxed and dedicated to their teaching, handling their classrooms of 20–25 without assistants. All told me they sought positions at the academy because they were tired of the turmoil in their previous schools.

Students echoed this keen desire for orderly and safe environments; they were attentive and engaged in projects, assignments, or dialogue. There were no clusters of outliers paying scant attention or playing with iPods. I chatted with a handful of 12th graders in the hall, who proudly told me which colleges they had applied to and where they had been accepted.

Secrets of Success

What makes the difference for students in these programs? Attributes that appear to contribute to students' success include the opportunity to belong to a positive peer group; a strong focus on motivation and self-discipline; an emphasis on academic preparedness and improvement; conscientious mentoring; close monitoring of how and what students are doing; accountability and consequences; demanding schedules; teamwork; valuing the students and believing they can succeed; structure and routine; periodic recognition and rewards; and, of course, a safe and secure environment.

Robert, a student at Chicago Military Academy, had gotten into lots of fights. His mother was a drug addict, and his father a disappearing act. Yet the school managed to reach him. He explained,

If you feel like nobody cares about you, then you feel like a nobody. But there's a lot of people here who really like me. They'll pull me aside and tell me what I did wrong. And they tell me what I've done right. (Johnson, 2002)

A Safe Environment

Students value safety and security as much as teachers do. As Louis Adams, a savvy 14-year-

old at the academy, observed,

Most people take a look at today's political situation—Iraq and all—and don't want to come. ... They don't know this isn't a boot camp but a controlled environment where you don't worry about the kid next to you pulling a knife on you. (Tugend, 2005, p. B9)

In a quasi-military public high school like Philadelphia Military Academy/Leeds, the strictly enforced "Cadet Creed" (see p. 33) and code of conduct, coupled with JROTC personnel who monitor the halls, enable educators to teach and cadets to learn without fear of disruption or danger. Students follow strict procedures for arrival and departure from school: They are instructed not to loiter or roam around the building or walk on neighbors' lawns and to wear their complete uniforms, with shirts tucked in, until they arrive home. There are clear rules governing uniforms and the length of students' hair.

The academy's calm and orderly atmosphere is substantially attributable to the requirement that students move about the building in squads under the direction of student platoon leaders, who authorize them to proceed, seek permission from the teacher to enter the classroom, and instruct the cadets to take their seats. The platoon system fosters peer pressure to behave and positions the most accomplished upper-classmen as role models and authority figures.

When I visited Philadelphia Military Academy/Leeds, I saw the principal and JROTC mentors stop solo students in the hallways; inquire where they were headed (and why one student had not been in school the previous day); and then grant them permission to proceed to their destination (or send them back to the classroom). In addition to being readily accessible to students, the JROTC mentors have primary responsibility for maintaining discipline, counseling cadets in need of anger management, and supervising such military-like activities as marching and drills.

Accelerated Learning

The academies operate under the aegis of local school districts and are subject to the same curriculum requirements and testing regimens that apply to public schools. In contrast, the ChalleNGe program serves dropouts, who in many instances are far behind academically. Since traditional pedagogy has not worked for these young people, ChalleNGe is free to use different instructional content and methods, notably an approach called Functional Context Education.

Functional Context Education is designed to generate swift gains in reading and math skills by teaching academics in the context of learning and performing a given task. For instance, an electrician in training may learn math concepts while she fixes a malfunctioning device. Or a maintenance worker may improve his reading skills while learning to use job-specific manuals, specifications, and forms. Military researchers have found that compared with general literacy instruction, this kind of learning-to-do instruction generates robust and rapid gains in job-related literacy that endure over time (Sticht, 1997).

The Youth ChalleNGe program combines general and job-related literacy instruction. For example, as part of their community-service commitment, program participants may be

required to build a winding, quarter-mile path for disabled children in a park. To do so, they must figure out how much gravel they need, what additional supplies are required, how to structure the flow of supplies and equipment to get the job done up to standard and on time, and how to handle the assignment as a team.

Focus on the Whole Adolescent

Interestingly, the most compelling core value of these programs is one that the terms *military* and *quasi-military* are unlikely to bring to mind: their overriding commitment to the education and development of the whole adolescent. This philosophy resonates with me as a parent and as the co-chair of ASCD's Commission on the Whole Child. In our 2007 report, the Commission declared that educating and developing whole children entails

- Promoting their physical, social, and emotional health.
- Providing safe and secure environments for learning.
- Fostering engagement and a sense of connection.
- Engaging and training caring adults.
- Ensuring broad-based education for each child.

The Youth ChalleNGe program embraced a philosophy akin to the Commission's from the very outset. Consider the extensive overlap between the Commission's vision and the eight core components listed on the ChalleNGe Web site: academic excellence, leadership/followership, job skills, responsible citizenship, service to the community, life-coping skills, physical fitness, and health and hygiene.

As clinical psychologist Edmund Gordon remarked at a Brookings Institution policy forum last fall,

One of the things that we can learn from what they do in those [quasi-military] schools—and it is reflected in the ChalleNGe Program—is that they appear to be taking an almost public health approach to education. They recognize that the isolation of educational problems in the school doesn't make sense when there are so many things outside of schooling that influence both healthy development and learning how to think. (Brookings Institution, 2007, p. 28)

The Lessons for Public Schools

How can promising attributes and approaches like these be applied more widely in public education to aid youngsters who are struggling in school and in life? Several potential applications strike me as worth pursuing:

- Reading and math immersion programs for youngsters who chronically achieve below grade level. These programs could incorporate features of Functional Context Education and could be offered during the summer, or even during the school year if needed.
- Intensive transitional academies for youngsters who are drifting through school, becoming disengaged, repeating grades, or dropping out. These nonresidential

alternative programs could draw on the design and components of ChalleNGe to equip students to return to academic or vocational school, secure a GED, pursue postsecondary training, or enter the labor force.

- Freestanding public high schools or schools within schools that emulate the characteristics and components of these military programs. Two models come to mind. One might be for youngsters who are academically capable and well adjusted and who yearn to attend schools that are orderly, structured, and safe. The other could serve higher proportions of low-performing youngsters who exhibit motivation and potential but need heavier doses of guidance, encouragement, mentoring, and developmental support.

Let's be clear about what I am proposing. I do not advocate militarizing public schools or having them become vehicles for military recruitment. I realize that merely invoking, much less involving, the military worries some parents, educators, and policymakers. What's more, given the mounting demands the military faces these days, it may have a limited appetite for expanding its involvement in nonmilitary initiatives. Therefore, in order for these promising methods and models to help more youngsters, they must be adapted to work in a civilian environment.

Almost all of these attributes could be incorporated in purely civilian schools using civilian curriculums and personnel. Instead of counselors who are officially affiliated with one of the military branches, schools could employ properly screened military retirees to play the same role. Instead of military-style uniforms, students could wear common outfits that allow for some differentiation based on seniority, responsibilities, or accomplishments. Assuming that students apply for admission, the academic expectations and codes of conduct could be backstopped by the threat of expulsion.

Innovative school districts are perfectly capable of creating and sustaining schools that feature these attributes without relying on any military branches as partners. As experience with the Troops-to-Teachers program suggests, many military retirees, both able-bodied and disabled, want to serve young people and could bring their distinctive training to bear on the way schools and classrooms function.

Given the severe challenges facing far too many schools and the achievement crisis threatening millions of students, educators must be open to new methods that have succeeded with young people in other settings. The U.S. military is a repository of knowledge and experience worth mining.

Core Components of the Youth ChalleNGe Program

1. **Leadership/Followership.** Cadets live and learn in a structured group environment, assuming various roles and responsibilities that help them identify and apply individual moral and ethical standards.
2. **Responsible Citizenship.** In class, in student government, and through experiences with local communities, cadets learn about the U.S. government structure and processes, along with individual rights and responsibilities at the local, state, and national level.
3. **Service to Community.** In groups and individually, each cadet performs a minimum of 40 hours of community service or conservation project activities. These activities provide career exploration and enhance awareness of community needs.
4. **Life-Coping Skills.** The combination of classroom activities and a structured living environment build increased self-esteem and self-discipline, helping cadets develop individual strategies and coping mechanisms for managing personal finance and dealing with such emotions as anger, grief, frustration, and stress.
5. **Physical Fitness.** Cadets participate in a rigorous physical fitness program.
6. **Health and Hygiene.** Using a holistic approach, cadets explore the effects of substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases on their physical health and well-being. They learn the physical and emotional benefits of proper nutrition through participation in classes and group discussions.
7. **Job Skills.** Cadets explore careers through career assessment and interest inventories, job-specific skills orientation and awareness, and training in area vocational centers. Students develop individual resumes, complete job applications, and prepare for and conduct job interviews.
8. **Academic Excellence.** All cadets attend daily academic classes preparing them for testing for the General Education Development (GED) credential, a high school diploma, or increased math and reading comprehension.

Source: Adapted from the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program Web site, http://new.ngycp.org/aboutus_dependant_T9_R29.php. Copyright 2008 by the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program. Used with permission.

Cadet Creed

I am a Philadelphia Military Academy cadet. I will always conduct myself to bring credit to my family, country, school, and corps of cadets.

I am loyal and patriotic. I am the future of the United States of America.

I do not lie, cheat, or steal, and will always be accountable for my actions and deeds.

I will always practice good citizenship and patriotism. I will work hard to improve my mind and strengthen my body.

I will seek the mantle of leadership and stand prepared to uphold the Constitution and the American way of life.

May God grant me the strength to live by this creed.

Source: Philadelphia Military Academies. Used with permission.

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