

In an arresting report released last spring, McKinsey & Company, the noted management consulting firm, issued a stark assessment of the severe price America pays for various achievement gaps, namely those between America and better-performing nations, between black and Latino students and white students, between low-income and other youngsters, and between low-performing students and the rest. According to McKinsey:

“... (T)he persistence of these educational achievement gaps imposes on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession. The recurring annual economic cost of the international achievement gap is substantially larger than the deep recession the United States is currently experiencing.”¹

Compounding the challenge facing our schools is the reality that basic academic skills are necessary but not sufficient prerequisites for productive workers who are coveted by employers. An illuminating survey conducted by the Conference Board found that the most important skills in the opinion of employers are professionalism, teamwork, oral communications, ethics and social responsibility, and reading comprehension.² Looking to the future, the employers surveyed project that the portfolio of necessary skills over the next five years will expand to include foreign language, critical thinking, creativity/innovation, and appropriate choices about their health and wellness.

Academic data tells us that meeting these employers’—and the country’s—needs will be a huge challenge: Minority students, principally Latino and black youngsters, have surged to 42 percent of public school enrollment nationally, up from 22 percent merely three decades ago.

Despite heartening gains in some school districts, these economically indispensable young people, along with low-income students generally, consistently lag farthest behind academically. As recently as 2007, roughly half of all 4th graders who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches read “below basic” as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Nationally, about one-third of students drop out of school, with the rate for black and Latino youngsters considerably higher at roughly one-half. Many students repeat grades. Less documented, but no less ominous, are the large numbers of students who lose interest in school and give up trying to achieve. Some schools are failing so miserably that they have been labeled “dropout factories.”



Utilizing **MILITARY EDUCATION** and Training Methods To Help Struggling Students and Schools

By **Hugh B. Price**

The academic and developmental needs of these struggling students are not effectively aligned with the way their schools operate. The continuum of underperformance and need includes: children who achieve way below par year after year; youngsters whose disengagement is so intractable that they are unlikely to be reached by conventional schools; pupils who are capable of achieving, but who yearn for learning environments that are orderly, structured and safe; and school dropouts who would profit from a transformative educational and developmental experience that steers them back to school, toward a GED certificate, and into post-secondary education, training, or the labor market.

Why the Military?

For the millions of youngsters who are faring poorly in public schools, we urgently need new paradigms—derived from different repositories of knowledge and practice—about educating and developing young people who are struggling in school and in life.

This article, indeed, this issue of the *Standard*, is based on the contention that the U.S. military is one promising place for educators to look for insights and ideas. After all, the military enjoys a well-deserved reputation for reaching, teaching, and training young people who are rudderless and for setting the pace among American institutions in advancing minorities. What's more, for many years various branches of the military have either run or collaborated with public schools in operating alternative schools, schools within schools, extracurricular programs, and youth corps for dropouts. Following are some of the most promising examples.

National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program

Launched in 1993 and operating in more than half the states, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, supported by the National Guard Youth Foundation, aims to get high school dropouts back on track. The 22-week residential program for 16-18 year-olds typically operates on underutilized military bases. It strives to make basic lifestyle changes through a rigorous program of education, training and service to the community.

Last winter, MDRC, the distinguished education and social policy research organization, released the preliminary results of a rigorous evaluation utilizing random assignment.³ The preliminary effects of the program are striking:

- Participants in the program group were much more likely than the controls to have earned a high school diploma or GED certificate. The contrasting ratios were almost half (46 percent) of participants versus 10 percent of non-participants.
- Participants were much more likely than the controls to be working and also more likely to be attending college. Eleven percent of participants were taking college courses versus three percent of controls. Slightly more than 30 percent of participants were working full time as opposed to 21 percent of the control group.

Furthermore, ChalleNGe generates accelerated achievement gains, as evidenced by the fact that program graduates climb on average 1.5 grades in reading and 2.2 grades in math in a matter of 22 weeks.

Public Military Academies

Another intriguing innovation is public military academies. A number of school districts have created full-fledged schools and schools-within-schools, not simply extracurricular programs, in the image of the military. The demand for slots in these schools is robust, frequently as high as 10 to 1. The academies by and large attract academically solid students who are drawn to such features as a disciplined approach, college prep focus, achievement-oriented peer group, safe and orderly atmosphere, teachers who genuinely believe they can succeed, and supportive JROTC instructors who double as surrogate aunts and uncles, even parents, who are on call to help see them through rough patches in their lives.

How well do they work? Drawing conclusions is tricky because of spotty data coupled with possible selection bias since these are schools of choice. Nonetheless, certain academies have begun to demonstrate their effectiveness. For the 2008-09 academic year the attendance and graduation rates of the public military academies in Chicago outperformed the district's public high schools. In 2006 the percentage of students at the Philadelphia Military Academy-Leeds who scored at or above the national average on the standardized TerraNova 9th grade tests exceeded the district-wide scores by an impressive 29 points in reading and 20 points in math. In Philadelphia, the academy's average daily attendance rate of 93 percent outshines the district-wide average of 81 percent.

What's more, the teacher absentee rate at the academy of less than one percent far surpasses the district-wide

rate of 8 percent and appears to attest to the teachers' desire to work in this distinctive environment. As an AP English teacher at Elverson Military Academy in Philadelphia told me recently, she relishes working there for many reasons. It is calmer and more organized than other schools. She is not afraid. And students actually tell classmates who misbehave to shut up.

Troubled Traditional High Schools

In at least one instance I know of (West Philadelphia High School), the district has exported seasoned administrators along with the firm and consistent methods of a public military academy to a troubled traditional school. The early results are encouraging. The graduation rate has climbed to 87 percent from 60 percent, violent acts in the school have declined by 52 percent, and attendance has jumped more than 10 percent to 85 percent.

Army Preparatory School at Fort Jackson, SC

Faced with a tough recruiting environment, the Army has begun dipping into the pool of high school dropouts. In September 2008 it launched the Army Preparatory School for young people who pass the qualifying exam and want to join, but cannot because they lack at least a GED certificate. They first enlist provisionally and then are assigned to this program. If they earn the GED, they proceed to basic training as full-fledged enlistees. Of the first class of 400 who signed up last fall, 99 percent earned the GED—within three weeks. Again, there is strong motivation and self-selection bias built into these results, but the initiative quickly caught the attention of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), which

has since entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Army to collaborate in using the military's expertise to improve educational outcomes for young people.

Bravo Company

Since 1998, state officials in Oklahoma have operated a 16-week program for 12 to 18-year-olds in the custody of the juvenile correction system that generally mimics the ChalleNGe Program in mission and structure. It is called Bravo Company, or officially known as the Thunderbird Regimented Training Program (TRTP). A companion program called STARS (State Tracking and Reintegration System) keeps close track of adjudicated youngsters who live in the community. Data generated by TRTP indicates that the graduation rate averages nearly 90 percent and that 80 percent do not commit further offenses after graduation. According to the director of youth programs for the Oklahoma Military Department, Bravo saves the state \$22 million in prison expenditures annually. Two states authorize JROTC units inside their juvenile corrections facilities.

Key Attributes

Programs like these share certain attributes that appear to contribute to the students' success and satisfaction. These include:

- the opportunity to “belong” to a positive peer group;
- strong focus on motivation and self-discipline;
- emphasis on academic preparedness and improvement;
- conscientious mentoring of the youngsters;
- close monitoring of how and what they are doing (accountability and consequences);

- demanding schedules;
- teamwork;
- valuing and believing that the young people can succeed;
- structure and routine;
- periodic recognition and rewards; and, of course,
- safe and secure environments.

Interestingly enough, the most compelling core value of these programs is the very one that the terms “military” and “quasi-military” are least likely to bring to mind. I refer to their overriding commitment to the education and development of “whole” adolescents. For example, the eight components of ChalleNGe are: academic excellence; leadership/followership; job skills; responsible citizenship; service to the community; life coping skills; physical fitness; and health and hygiene.

As eminent clinical psychologist Dr. Edmund Gordon remarked at a Brookings Institution policy forum:

One of the things that we can learn from what they do in [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.⁴

Another distinctive attribute of many of these programs is their departure from traditional pedagogy, which clearly has not worked with youngsters who chronically lag behind and tend to lose interest in school. These military-like programs frequently emphasize

learning by doing, sometimes referred to as Functional Context Education (FCE). True to the military's predilection for fast-track training, FCE is designed to generate swift gains in reading and math skills by teaching academics "in the context" of learning and actually performing a given task. 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.

The Youth ChalleNGe program combines general and job-related literacy instruction. As Daniel Donohue, the founder and architect of the program, explained at the Brookings forum, youngsters in ChalleNGe receive classroom instruction augmented by computerized instruction, all provided by a certified teacher. As part of their community service commitment, they may be required to build a winding, quarter-mile path for disabled children in a park. To do so, they must figure out how many cubic feet of gravel are needed, 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.

Applying Military Approaches in Public Schools

How can promising attributes and approaches like these be used more widely in public education to aid youngsters who are struggling in school and in life? A number of potential applications merit consideration.

For **in-School Youth**, the following initiatives come to mind:

Offer reading and math immersion programs patterned after the

military's fast-track instructional methods and focused on students who are performing way below par and repeating grades. These could incorporate appropriate features of Functional Context Education and be offered during the summer or for an entire semester.

Create/expand public military high schools in school districts that are committed to providing small themed and/or charter schools as alternatives to large zoned schools.

Establish middle schools and high schools that emulate those attributes and methods of military education and training that are appropriate for students who do not wish to attend schools with overtly military themes and trappings. Two models come to mind. One might be for youngsters who are academically capable and well-adjusted, but who yearn to attend schools that are orderly, structured, and safe. The other could serve greater proportions of low-performing students who nonetheless exhibit motivation and potential but need stronger doses of guidance and encouragement, mentoring and developmental support.

Incorporate military methods, structures, and appropriately-trained retirees into troubled middle and high schools plagued by dysfunction and poor performance. In the absence of closing these faltering schools, districts often have no choice but to try to redesign them in flight, so to speak. Thus, a promising alternative to the untenable status quo is to introduce the styles of leadership and staffing, operational methods, and structure akin to the quasi-military models.

Other inventions could be implemented for **Out-of-School Youth**:

Expand the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, which currently operates in over half the states and has served approximately 75,000 youngsters since its inception. Assuming that the impressive preliminary results from the MDRC evaluation hold up, ChalleNGe deserves to be extended to every state and offered to exponentially more dropouts who are up to its demands.

Implement civilian versions of the Army Preparatory School for motivated dropouts. Link the fast-track education and training to occupations and employers in relatively steady sectors like transportation, telecommunications and health care so that, as with the Army program, participants have a reasonable chance of realizing a fairly quick and concrete payoff from their participation.

Create non-residential, intensive "transitional" academies for youngsters who are disengaged from school and dropping out. This alternative program could be based on a concept developed by Dan Donohue, the founder and architect of ChalleNGe, and draw heavily on the design and components of ChalleNGe. Its purpose would be to equip disengaged youth and dropouts to successfully return to academic or vocational school, secure a GED, pursue post-secondary training, or enter the labor force.

Lastly, for **Incarcerated Youths**, states could:

Establish quasi-military alternatives to incarceration patterned after Bravo Company or JROTC for adolescents who have run afoul of the law, but genuinely want to straighten out their lives. Those who squander this second chance would be remanded to reform school or jail.

Implementation Scenarios

Some of these ideas are logical extensions of programs that are backed by encouraging evidence, while others are so novel that it would be appropriate to proceed initially with pilots that are rigorously evaluated. Many structural and curricular considerations must be weighed and resolved at the outset. These include: what kinds of students these initiatives will serve and how they will be selected; whether these are brand new programs or turnaround scenarios; which military-like attributes will be emulated and which ones will be avoided; how the curriculum will be aligned with state standards yet still tailored to students' needs; and

unit to access the expertise and models in the National Guard Bureau at the Pentagon;

- Enlist experienced military retirees and former directors of state ChalleNGe units to advise the district on the design and implementation of local programs; and/or
- Enlist current and former principals of public military academies and leaders of JROTC programs in other school systems to advise the district on designing and implementing these initiatives.

Interested states could:

- Take advantage of the MOU executed by the Army and NASBE to help tap the military's education programming expertise;

ingredients of ChalleNGe and other suitable military models.

At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education could:

- Form a dedicated program design group comprised of experts from education and defense to devise military-inspired initiatives that DOE would be prepared to fund, say, on an RFP basis. These could be new ideas or expansions of proven/promising approaches already operating in schools.
- Forge strategic alliances with other federal agencies, e.g., Departments of Labor and Justice, as well as with the National Guard, the Army or other branches of the military, that are willing to share their methods,

For the millions of youngsters who are faring poorly in public schools, we urgently need new paradigms.

how the programs will be staffed by teachers and JROTC-like instructors.

School districts that want to implement the kinds of military-inspired initiatives suggested above can proceed in the any of the following ways. They could:

- Figure out how to move forward on their own based on available case studies, evaluations, and other literature;
- Build out from the JROTC program if one already exists in the schools;
- Partner with the state National Guard if it operates a ChalleNGe unit. If, as is sometimes the case, the state National Guard does not, then the district could possibly use the good offices of the state

- If the federal government is prepared to expand ChalleNGe at existing sites or in new states, then the state government could provide the requisite matching funds;
- Provide funding to launch non-residential versions of ChalleNGe for motivated school dropouts;
- Instruct the state National Guard and the juvenile corrections system to collaborate on creating the equivalent of Bravo Company or JROTC, and reprogram state juvenile corrections appropriations to finance the endeavor; and/or
- Fund and instruct the state National Guard to assist local school districts in implementing new initiatives that incorporate the core academic and developmental

models, and expertise for the purpose of helping interested states and school districts design and implement the kinds of initiatives recommended earlier.

Finally, the White House could take the deployment of military models and methods to help rescue America's troubled adolescents to an entirely new plateau by exhorting—and funding—the states to join the federal government in fashioning a new, 21st century mission and structure for the National Guard.

The National Guard performs domestic as well as national defense functions. Indeed, one of its mandates is to add peacetime value to America. In addition to the Youth ChalleNGe Program, the Guard has a long

cont'd to page 60

In looking at federal education policies over the last 10 years, do you suppose increased mandates combined with budget crises also made education more receptive to nontraditional partnerships?

I'm seeing more local districts forming foundations. They're looking for other avenues to acquire resources to do the work they need to do in the districts. Looking at non-traditional resources and agencies to help them make the needed changes. Whether or not the military is one of those things, I don't know, but because the company I work for and the position I'm in, I certainly

cont'd from page 13 Utilizing Military Education...

tradition of operating programs for schoolchildren. The scenario I envision might unfold as follows:

- To ensure that the division of labor and line of demarcation between this distinctive domestic role and other customary National Guard functions is clear and impenetrable, states would establish a separate administrative department under the aegis of the Guard whose sole mission is to implement and oversee these new initiatives. This function would be jointly funded by the federal and state governments.
- This dedicated unit of the National Guard could then launch and operate the kinds of programs for out-of-school and incarcerated youth that fall outside the traditional domains of local school districts and state juvenile corrections departments.
- This department could also work collaboratively with interested school districts to operate fast-track immersion programs, quasi-military middle schools and high schools, and/or schools that embrace the desired military attributes.

There are many reasons why deploying the National Guard to play this important domestic role in their states makes sense, including:

- It captures the virtues of military

see school districts asking for more money and programs than in the past.

I think once organizations like NASBE are seen forming an agreement with the Army, the education community will take pause and people will delve in deeper. Once we get results from this relationship, which I am confident will be positive, I think you will see a movement of districts and state boards going to the Army for resources or assistance to help bring about sustained change in their schools.



training and ensures continuity of National Guard involvement, while insulating these initiatives from competing demands on the institution.

- The National Guard's nearly 20-year experience with the Youth ChalleNGe Program brings a distinct combination of institutional knowledge, mature operating models, and long-term, "on-the-ground" experience working with troubled youth.
- As a branch of the military, the Guard has the organizational capacity and management systems to take these programs to scale.
- Through ChalleNGe, the Guard at the national and state level is passionately committed to turning around the lives of troubled teenagers, and it "operationalizes" all of the key attributes cited earlier that are worth emulating.
- The National Guard has readier access to idle military bases and other public facilities in the states than most civilian entities.
- This dedicated unit of the Guard would enjoy continuing access to emerging military research, best practice, and training methods that are germane to young people served by quasi-military programs.

In conclusion, millions of youngsters who strive to achieve are marooned in disorderly and dysfunctional schools. Others who are performing poorly, acting out, or struggling emotionally end up marginalized academically and destined for social and economic oblivion in the 21st century. The U.S. military figured out long ago how to operate disciplined, goal-oriented educational programs, and how to unleash the potential of aimless youngsters. By demilitarizing and deploying what the military knows about educating and developing young people, we can transform school failure into life success for vastly more American children.

Hugh B. Price is visiting professor at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, and non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

¹McKinsey & Company, "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools: Summary of Findings," April 2009, p. 6.

²Susan Stewart, "Key Findings: Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce," (New York, NY; The Conference Board, 2006).

³Dan Bloom, Alissa Gardenhire-Crooks, and Conrad Mandsager, "Reengaging High School Dropouts: Early Results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program Evaluation," (New York, NY; MDRC, February 2009). www.mdrc.org/publications/512/full.pdf.

⁴Edmund Gordon, "Quasi-Military Approaches to Educating Students Who Are Struggling in School and in Life," Presentation at Brookings Institution Policy Forum, October 31, 2007. Washington, DC.