

An Innovation for School Dropouts—An Alternative to Spending Billions?

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Ohio Governor Bob Taft sent liberal hearts racing recently with his plan to pump billions of dollars into the construction and rehabilitation of schools around the state. His concern is understandable, but there are others options that the state's Facilities Commission and Governor Taft should consider. Ironically, at about the same time as the Governor was unrolling his new school plan, I was touring a formerly abandoned warehouse in Akron, thus getting a glimpse of an exciting alternative vision of education.

Once again, Dave Brennan and his White Hat Management organization have established a special place to address the particular needs of kids who are left behind in the cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all public-school environment. And he's doing so not by spending lavishly, but with a moderate, well-targeted program. Once again, he's using as his cornerstone old-fashioned notions such as discipline and order in a previously underserved corner of the education market, those who have dropped out of school.

White Hat's president and CEO, John Morris, recently ushered me on a tour of the place, the Life Skills Center of Akron, located in a converted warehouse at 80 W. Bowery Street. The school now caters to about 160 students—most ranging in age from 16 to 22—but the plan is to double that before long.

I spent quite a bit of time speaking with staff and observing the school's operations. Even a casual visitor quickly notices that there's a strict code of behavior, and students are made to understand what's expected of them. Many of these kids were evidently bored with their conventional schooling, or their lives grew too complicated to include school, and so they dropped out. For them, the Life Skills Center offers a second chance. Students can sign up for any one of three sessions of three hours each. And classes will be offered year-round, thus providing further options for students.

The school places a special emphasis on job placement after graduation. A job listing board is posted in a prominent place. The school also has established relationships with both Xerox and Microsoft, and students can thus become certified to work as installers of their technology. And as Morris explains, a social

worker is on hand to help counsel students who have some form of personal baggage that interrupts their smooth entry into the job market.

For me, the school's tightly focused, no-frills approach to education and vocational training carried echoes of my military service during World War II. With a shooting war going on, the U.S. Marines didn't waste a lot of time having its instructors teaching recruits nonessential subjects. We simply learned how to operate radio and other communications gear quickly and efficiently, with an eye to putting it into practice in the real world. We were expected to learn quickly and well, by paying close attention and working hard, or else. And guess what? We did! By calmly setting its expectations high, the Marine Corps guaranteed that we would do the same, regardless of our individual background or native capacity to learn.

A half century later, Mr. Brennan's new school in Akron similarly reminds us that there are plenty of kids in this society who simply aren't interested in all the distracting frills offered up by today's public school. For whatever reason, they have no inclination to partake in extras like band or chess club. And they feel no compulsion to immerse themselves in the educational establishment's latest trendy theories for partaking in, say, safe sex.

Instead, these kids are focused on the humdrum job of acquiring skills that will enable them to land a well-paying job. And like it or not, the change-averse public education establishment is going to have to figure out a way to meet that demand, or they'll lose such niche markets to educational entrepreneurs like David Brennan, who has a demonstrated ability to drive educrats to distraction.

So here's a respectful suggestion for our new Governor. Postpone any radical new educational spending plans until you visit this unorthodox center, which deploys educational resources in surprising new ways. It might just change your mind about what really matters, and what really works, in public education. Ω