

THE WORK FORCE

A Program of the Cambridge (MA) Housing Authority

The Work Force is a comprehensive educational enrichment and work-readiness program for teens in Cambridge public housing. Unusual for its depth of engagement with young people, the program provides participants with sustained networks of learning and support over a five-year span: from the eighth grade through their senior year in high school. Since its inception in 1984, The Work Force has used a strengths-based approach to promote achievement in all the venues in which participants conduct their lives: at home, at school and at work.

A central goal of the program is to weave a web of support across a broad range of individuals and institutions, giving teens a reassuring model of adult cooperation. To achieve this goal, The Work Force operates from facilities located in the city's three largest family public housing developments, promoting particularly strong connections with students and their families. In addition, the program cultivates relationships with school personnel and with over 45 local "employer-mentors" to create what staff has called "a conspiracy of nurturance" among the adults in its young participants' lives.

By design, the program serves youth with a wide range of interests and abilities. Participation requires only that students live in public housing and be enrolled in school. While some Work Force participants are excellent students, most are marginalized and lack the proper sustained support to thrive academically.

The Work Force's holistic approach has proven to be a formidable remedy in closing this achievement gap. Working very closely with the local school district, The Work Force provides educational support for the full five years of participation, with a strong emphasis on facilitating the critical transitions from 8th to 9th grade, and from 12th grade to college or employment. Staff track school attendance and academic performance, facilitate meetings between parents and school personnel, help students to plan their coursework, and provide regular access to computers, homework help and 1:1 tutoring at all three program sites. All students who enroll in college after graduation are awarded a modest scholarship to help with the cost of books.

Weekly after-school workshops, designed by program staff, introduce broad-based competencies that stress the related goals of personal empowerment, educational achievement, and economic mobility. Program participants are also exposed to a variety of paid, private and public sector after-school "try-out" jobs with over 45 local private and public sector employers, who help students to hone their workplace skills, as well as their post-secondary education and career goals. All of these services are woven together through a case management system that requires students to set annual school-, home-, and work-related goals, documenting their growth as they progress through the program.

Since 1984, The Work Force has achieved a remarkable history of success. The retention rate over the five-year term of participation is historically close to 80% and more than 90% of Work Force seniors go on to college. In a third-party study of program alumni, fully 91% of respondents reported that they were either working or going to school and, of particular importance to those of us in the field of public housing, 66% no longer reside in public housing.

For more information, contact:

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