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A Program for Entry-Level Juvenile Offenders in Elko 1997

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Introduction

Nevada has the highest juvenile incarceration rate in the country, with the exception of Washington, D.C. Based upon this statistic and the needs assessments described below, Nevada Cooperative Extension and more than 30 community collaborators in three rural Nevada counties began Project "MAGIC". The program is designed for entry-level juvenile offenders and their families.

Several Nevada studies indicate that taxpayers support prevention programming. In a recent survey of rural counties in Nevada, 71 percent of the local population indicated support for increased spending for programs that might help to prevent juvenile crime. A recent statewide survey of all adjudicated youth in state-run juvenile detention facilities found that few alternatives to detention exist.

Nevada jails 407 per 100,000 youth, an almost 50 percent increase during the past decade. The rapid growth in many rural Nevada communities has contributed to the juvenile problem. The counties involved in this project (Elko, Lander, and Humboldt) have seen their school-age populations double during the past 10 years primarily due to the gold-mining boom. Dramatic increases in youth suicide, crime, pregnancy rates, school dropouts, runaways, truancy, and substance abuse are the symptoms. Existing positive activities for youth are overburdened and, in many cases, of little interest to "at-risk" teens. Thus, Project "MAGIC" was developed. "MAGIC", making a group and individual commitment, is an acronym for the philosophy of the project.

The Program

The purpose of Project "MAGIC" is to teach teens skills that will help them get out of the juvenile justice system and become productive members of the community. The main thrust of the program focuses on enhancing the juvenile's basic social and interpersonal skills of positive communication, problem solving, decision making, self-responsibility, conflict resolution, goal setting and aspiration building. Community leadership and career development are additional components for juvenile offenders and their families. Parents enhance their parenting skills through self-paced lessons designed for people working 12-hour rotating shifts in 24-hour industries.

This project was implemented with a five-year federal grant. Evaluations include pre/posttesting, observations, and portfolio entries. Pre/posttesting on 79 teen graduates in the three-county area have been completed. Results indicate statistically significant increases in the areas of decision-making, conflict resolution, goal setting, and communication. Eighty-two percent of the parents participated in the self-paced education component. They reported significant gains in their parenting knowledge. A follow-up of project teens to determine long-term success and movement toward productive adulthood is currently in progress. In addition, community citizen teams are working on project sustainability.

Research Base

Research conducted by the Search Institute (1995), provided the basis for the program. This research indicates developmental assets reduce negative behaviors and increase positive behaviors in youth. These assets include both external factors and internal factors. External assets surround youth in many different contexts such as adult support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets help youth make good choices and result in a commitment to learning, positive values, positive identity, and social competencies.

Classic research regarding juvenile offenders indicates that many of these assets are missing. Dryfoos (1990) reviewed successful programs for high-risk youth. The design of this juvenile project incorporated many of the components Dryfoos identified as critical to program success. This project is designed to help youth and their families develop positive assets to reduce high-risk behaviors through small group meetings and community activities.

The curriculum materials were designed to address research that shows adjudicated youth are likely to be raised in families with high rates of conflict (West & Farrington, 1973); a history of low educational achievement (Hawkins & Lishner, 1987); and personal problems (Beschner, 1985; Hawkins, 1985). Frequent use of drugs is also common among juveniles who engage in delinquent behavior. In the National Youth Study, a self-report survey of a nationwide sample of adolescents, Elliot and Huizinga (1984) found that nearly 50 percent of serious juvenile offenders were also illicit drug users. Some authors suggest that serious and persistent delinquency, and frequent use of illicit drugs, emerge from common roots (Donovan & Jesson, 1984; Elliot, Huizinga & Ageton, 1985).

In reviewing the literature on delinquent youth and drug use, Hawkins & Lishner, (1987) summarized the following risk factors within the four basic areas of an ecological model. The first risk factor related to drug use involves individual behaviors and beliefs (early initiation and frequency of antisocial behaviors in elementary school, and individual attitudes and beliefs related to delinquency and substance use). The second risk factor is family related (parent and sibling drug use and criminal behavior, poor and inconsistent family management principles, family conflict, and family social deprivation). The third risk factor involves school attachment (school failure, low degree of commitment to education, and attachment to school). The fourth risk factor involves peers (association with delinquent and drug-using peers, attitudes of peers, and perceived use of drugs).

Based on previous research, Bernard (1991) outlined protective factors in four areas. The first area is related to the individual (social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose and future). The second area is related to the family (caring and support, high expectations for children's behavior, encouraging children's participation and responsibility). The third area is related to school (caring and support, friends, high expectations for all children, support for high achievement, positive expectations of children's capabilities, and youth participation and involvement). The fourth area is related to communities (an environment which facilitates a sense of belonging, and a sense of power and control over one's life, availability of resources for healthy human development, high expectations for youth, and opportunities to be contributing members of the community).

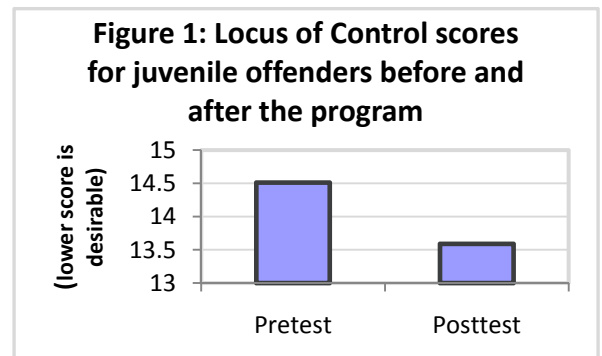
Program Evaluation

Fifty-two Elko juvenile offenders completed the program from January 1996 to May 1997. Results for these students are shown below.

Youth Data

1. Locus of Control

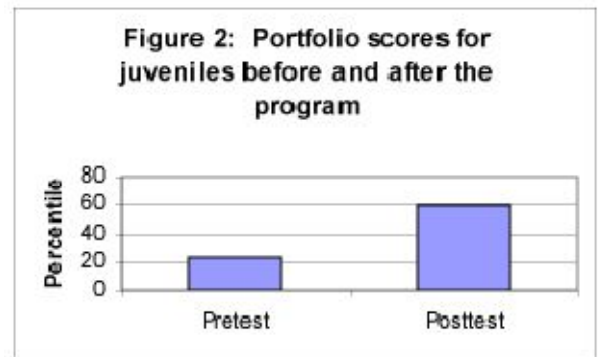
Juvenile offenders completed the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control (1973) as a pretest before the 20-session program began and as a posttest at the end of the program. Locus of Control measures the perception of connection between actions and outcomes. For example, a juvenile with the desired internal locus of control (lower score) believes that luck has little to do with getting a good grade in school. The 40-item questionnaire is a standardized test. As shown in Figure 1, the mean pretest score on the Locus of Control for the Elko juvenile offenders was 14.51. This score on the posttest was 13.59. The lower score on the posttest is desirable as it indicates more internal control.



2. Portfolios

Additional program evaluation data were collected from the portfolios that juveniles completed during the program. Portfolios showed student development in the skill areas taught. The portfolio scores were based upon a 100-point continuum. Throughout the 20 sessions, juveniles completed portfolio tasks demonstrating their abilities in positive conflict resolution; enhanced communication skills; increased cooperative behaviors; decreased aggression; and increased school performance and involvement. Student self-evaluation and a school report card were also included in the portfolio, as well as completed interactive parent postcards. Each week youth wrote to a parent/guardian, and the parent/guardian wrote back regarding family progress in the areas mentioned above.

Portfolios were scored using a continuum of behaviors constructed for this project with guidance from Far West Labs, a consulting group from San Francisco, California. The continuum ranges from 0 to 100. For descriptive purposes, the continuum was divided into four levels. Beginning level portfolio scores ranged from -10 to +15. Emerging level portfolio scores ranged from 16 to 45. Developing level portfolio scores ranged from 46 to 75. Maturing level portfolio scores ranged from 76 to 100. A score of 100 indicates that the juvenile was able to demonstrate mastery of all skills taught in the project. Figure 2, shows the portfolio results for the Elko groups. Mean portfolio scores were 23 (emerging) on the pretest activities and 59 (developing) on the posttest activities.



The average developing level project graduate demonstrated a mastery of skills in seven areas. Those seven skill areas were: (1) use of "I" statements; (2) ability to ask for help from others; (3) positive communication techniques; (4) ability to revisit behavior and propose alternatives without prompting; (5) shows remorse and can say "I'm sorry"; (6) knows steps to reach long-term goals; and (7) pays attention to needs of others.

3. Community Component

During the 20-session program, one of the program components was community leadership. Each group of students was asked to choose and plan a project that would make their community a better place to live. Projects the juvenile offenders completed included the following: school assembly for elementary students to promote staying drug free; Potluck/food and clothes drive; commissioner presentation and peacefest to raise money for Boys and Girls Clubs; trick or treat street puppet show for drug education; cleaning the health clinic and giving new toys to clinic; working with humane society to promote pet adoption.

Parent Data

An evaluation instrument was used by parents to rate their children's behavior changes. Parents reported the changes in behavior they observed in their child before and after the program. Scores are based upon 100 as a perfect score and 0 as the lowest score. The average parent rating of juveniles' behavior before the program was 62 percent. After the program, parents rated behavior at a 75 percent level (Figure 3).

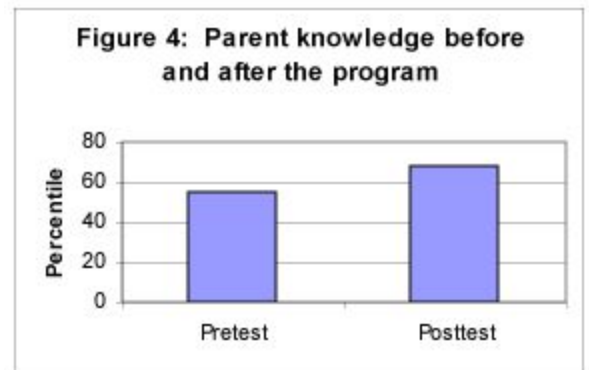
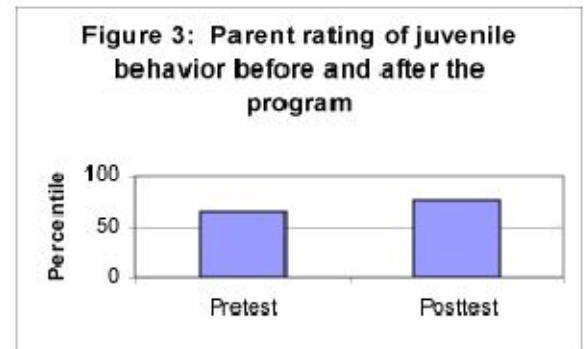
In addition to reporting on their children's behavior, parents also completed a pre and post survey of knowledge/skills they gained in the program's parent component. The parent survey was administered at the end of parent training. Parents were asked to think back to the start of the program and rate their parenting knowledge about helping youth develop positive skills. Then, they rated their knowledge/skills at the end of the program.

The parents rated their own skills in six different areas that were directly tied to the objectives of the parent component. The first area rated was awareness of the strengths and resources they bring to parenting. The second area rated was skills in praising and encouraging their children. The third area rated was realistic expectations for themselves and their family members. Use of positive communication and constructive conflict resolution skills was the fourth area rated. Confidence and skills in their ability to make decisions that promote the well being of their family was the fifth area the parents rated. Finally, they rated family functioning through teamwork and family recreation. These skills are shown in the results as a composite score. Parents noted an increase in knowledge and abilities of 13 points between the pre and posttest (Figure 4). Pretest scores were 55 and posttest scores were 68.

Conclusion

The results of this prevention program in Elko and northeast Nevada indicate the program is successful. It is currently being expanded to more areas of the criminal justice system. Program start-up costs of approximately \$1,500 per student are expected to decrease during the current year as curriculum and initial intensive planning/training sessions have been completed. Even at the current rate, this prevention program is saving significant tax dollars when compared to the approximately \$30,000 per person spent annually for incarceration. The chief of juvenile probation in one county indicated that if something were to happen to grant funding tomorrow, he would find the money to continue the project. Grant funding is in place for three more years, and project staff are confident that participating communities will want the program to be continued after that. However, the collaborative group is not waiting for already overburdened local resources to pick up the cost of the program. They are working with the state's Juvenile Justice Commission (Nevada's Community Approach to Juvenile and Family Justice, 1996), the University of Nevada, Reno and local collaborators on a plan for long term sustainability that includes a combination of local, state, and grant funded program support.

In 1997, Project "MAGIC" received a 2nd place national award from the National Rural Institute on Alcohol and Drug Abuse.



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