

Houston Addresses Dropouts

By Bill Hobby

This is a story about what one person has done to change the world.

Jim Ketelsen was chairman of the Board of Tenneco Inc., from 1978 to 1992, when he retired. He is a director of several major corporations and many civic groups.

His passion is Project GRAD.

Name intractable problems facing the nation, and the education of inner-city youth will come out very high on the list. We've watched the future of our young people compromised by mediocre schools, high dropout rates and a failure to acquire survival skills for a high-technology world. Ketelsen tackled this problem head on.

The first step was taken in 1989 when Tenneco formed a partnership with Jefferson Davis High School and the University of Houston Downtown. The idea was to encourage minority high school students to go to college. Jeff Davis is located just north of Houston's central business district. Students are 88 percent Hispanic, 10 percent African American, and 2 percent Anglo.

Tenneco committed to provide a \$1,000 college scholarship per year for four years to every Jeff Davis student who graduated on time, maintained a 2.5 grade point average in core courses, completed a mathematics sequence through algebra II and participated in two summer academic institutes at UH Downtown.

The summer institutes, named for Jesse Jones, are sponsored by Houston Endowment. For four weeks high school students receive intensive training in reading, study skills, time management, critical thinking and analytical skills, as well as mathematics and natural sciences.

This year, 500 Davis students attended these classes. More important is the success rate. Before the program started, about 20 of the 200 or more graduating from Jeff Davis attended college. This year, the number is more like 140.

The Tenneco/Houston Endowment program proved that low-income, minority, inner-city students could, with adequate support, be motivated toward higher achievements. Ketelsen wasn't satisfied. Too many students were being lost between first grade and high school graduation. The process had to start sooner.

His plan was to reach back into the seven elementary schools and one middle school that feed Jeff Davis High School. Project GRAD began in the fall of 1993, aimed at increasing parental involvement and upgrading student skills.

As part of the program, Communities in Schools-Houston, a year-round dropout prevention program, added a staff person to each elementary school. Their job is to connect families with social services available in the community.

Teachers in all of the schools volunteered some of their time to learn a new method, called Consistency Management, which helps create a supportive, but firm and orderly classroom environment. In these sessions, teachers are encouraged to hold high expectations for student behavior, and to increase student participation and pride.

Another part of the teacher training involves new math skills. "Move It Math" is a program developed at the University of Houston Victoria. Students of teachers who take this training have higher test scores and a better attitude about math.

Teachers also learn better ways to teach reading, writing and language through a program called "Success for All" developed at Johns Hopkins University.

It is an ambitious program. It requires great commitment from teachers and the school district. Almost all the training is complete--30,000 hours--and the new methods are in use.

It will take some time before results are clear, but the early signals are very good. The percentage of third graders meeting math minimum expectations increased 50 percent in the feeder schools on the May 1995 Texas Assessment of Academic Skills tests.

In Jefferson Elementary School, where teachers were trained first in Move It Math, about 70 percent of children in all grades passed the TAAS test. At Ryan Elementary, where scores were lowest in 1994 with only 27 percent of students meeting the minimum expectations, 78 percent more passed the test.

Reading scores have also improved, even though teachers completed their training in the "Success for All" program more recently.

Ketelsen isn't finished. Next year, teachers will learn a science program in addition to math and reading. A new math curriculum developed at the University of Chicago would allow students to start algebra and geometry in middle school and calculus in high school. He would like to see more full-day pre-school and partnerships with health clinics.

He wants to replicate the program. His next target is Yates High School, 88 percent African American, where 82 percent of students are considered at risk.

The amazing thing about Project GRAD is that it is accomplished largely with private donations. Contributors include Houston Endowment, the Brown Foundation, the Cullen Foundation, John and Becky Moores, GTE, the McNair Foundation and the Shell Foundation.

Jim Ketelsen is a businessman. He takes a bottom line approach. Project GRAD costs less than \$200 per student for the 6,500 students in the feeder schools.

The cost of failure is dramatically higher. An IBM study estimates that if the dropout rate continues unabated through 2010, Texas will need an additional \$1.8 billion in tax dollars to provide welfare and other human services.

And that \$1.8 billion is just the dollar cost. It doesn't begin to measure the blighted human lives.

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