

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

Abell Salutes: Outside Reading Project

*In the City Schools: Showmanship
Inspires Scholarship.*

People walking by Ashburton Elementary School at 3935 Hilton Road on the morning of June 5 at about 11:00 had to do a double take. There, up on the second story roof, a man seated at a desk was reading into a microphone to the obvious delight of several hundred students picnicking on the ground below. (He was reading "How the Elephant Lost His Trunk" from Kipling's "Just So Stories.") The man was Robert Marino, Principal, and he was up on the roof this day because he had lost a bet to his students, made at the beginning of the school year: that they would not read, during the year, 8,000 books. They read 8,459 books, meeting Marino's challenge to them that they could, if they met his "books-read" quota, "send him to the roof." Which is where, and why, the passers-by that day on Hilton Road saw Marino up there.

Principal Marino was making a point: that children from so-called disadvantaged schools and low-income families where reading in the home is not stressed can be persuaded not only to read but to read a lot — given the right incentives. Marino's roof-top performance is only a small part of a larger package of incentives that are invigorating the currently successful Outside Reading Project.

Since last September (1989), 10 Baltimore City elementary schools have set out to prove that schools can do much to eliminate the dearth of reading in the homes of their students. With small grants (\$2,000 each) from The Abell Foundation, these schools have designed and implemented projects to encourage and require outside reading by students.

So far the projects have had resounding success. Virtually every school has successfully implemented an outside

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"Choice:" A Baltimore Program Seeks to Keep Youth Out of Institutions and In the Mainstream; Is It An "Answer?" At Stake: Young Lives and Taxpayers' Dollars.

As you read this, you are paying with your taxes your share of as much as \$42,000 for every abused and neglected child, every delinquent, truant, ungovernable, or runaway child that the state's social service systems have seen fit to place in a residential facility.

That is one system for dealing with the problem. There is another: Choice. Operated by the University of Maryland Baltimore County, Choice is a public/private partnership with major foundation and private sector support. The program works to keep the young person out of the state's correctional and welfare systems and at considerable savings to the community. Cost per child over a 12-month period: \$7,200.

What is Choice? Can it promise to keep an at-risk child out of the costlier end of the residential placement — saving the taxpayer important tax dollars, and, at the same time, allowing that same taxpayer to enjoy the benefits that accrue to his community when a young and at-risk youth has been turned into a productive and achieving one?

* * * *

Tuesday, 9:00 a.m., a sparsely furnished room in the Cherry Hill Middle School. Five members of the Choice staff are seated around a table; they are supervisor Craig Dempsey, four case managers (each of whom has a case load of ten) — John O'Neill, Tom McClellan, Bobby Richardson, and Terry Brooks. Each is studying the same list of 40 names — students between the ages of 10 and 17 considered at risk in the southwest Baltimore community. These are the clients of Choice; it is the status of each of them, within the worlds of home and

school and neighborhood, that the staff of Choice is reviewing on this Tuesday morning. Dempsey calls the first name (names in all cases have been changed): "Arnette Westwood."

(Arnette is a 14-year-old boy who reads at the second or third grade level and is in the seventh grade. He has failed a grade at least twice and been suspended a number of times. His classmates are 12-year-olds, physically smaller and constantly making fun of him because he is illiterate. He has experimented with drugs or alcohol and may have sold drugs on occasion. He does not belong to a church or recreation team. He is sexually active. He is a delinquent — arrested for stealing \$7.50 worth of candy from a Rite Aid.)

O'Neill: "Arnette was missing last night, he hadn't come home for supper. I looked in the park, he wasn't there, I went to his girlfriend's, he wasn't there. I went back to his house at eleven and waited. I finally realized that he wasn't going to come home last night at all. I left for the night and came back at seven this morning. He was there. I woke him up."

Dempsey: "Did he say where he had been?"

O'Neill: "He said he stayed at his aunt's."

McClellan: "I called his aunt's. He wasn't there last night."

Dempsey: "John, pick him up after school and have him show you where he really was."

O'Neill: "I'll get back to you."

* * * *

Dempsey: "Sandra Roland."

(Sandra Roland is a 13-year-old girl in the seventh grade. She reads on the third or fourth grade level. She may have

had an abortion and though sexually active is not yet pregnant. Her mother has three or four other children and does not provide the support and guidance necessary during adolescence. What the child learns, she learns on the street. She does not belong to a club, a church or a recreational team. She had missed 110 days of school last year and has appeared before a community arbitrator on a truancy charge.)

Brooks: "I checked with her at school this morning. She's doing well, she hasn't missed any days this week."

O'Neill: "I prepped her at ten last night for her tutoring tonight."

Brooks: "That's good, because I have a meeting with her social worker tomorrow at one, and if she's doing this well I'd like to talk to the social worker about terminating Sandra's involvement in the intensive program, and getting her involved in the mentor program."

O'Neill: "I think the mentor program will keep her involved and busy."

Dempsey: "Good. Let's keep that moving."

* * * *

Dempsey: "Lawrence Casey."

(Lawrence is a 13-year-old boy in the seventh grade. He has failed at least once and reads on a second grade level. He became involved in Choice because he was truant from school, stayed out late in the community and had a number of behavior incidents both at home and at school. He is a large child for his age and does not belong to any club or have social or church affiliation. He is from a single parent home and has four siblings. His mother does have a live-in friend who is in constant conflict with the children. He has a low sense of self and has attempted to hurt himself on two separate occasions.)

McClellan: "We were called up to school early this morning. Larry was disruptive, even swore at the principal. So they sent him home on disciplinary removal."

Brooks: "We have him now in our 'suspension school' (an alternate site operated by Choice as a temporary alternative for those of its students on disciplinary removal)."

Dempsey: "He's very angry. Did we find out why?"

O'Neill: "Seems that when he went to visit his father this past weekend he

had a disappointing time. The father didn't take him where he was supposed to, and did a lot of drinking."

Dempsey: "I think it makes sense to talk to his social worker and his mother. Let's see what we can do to make sure those visits turn out better. It's affecting the kid's stability."

Brooks: "I'll set up the meeting with the social worker and get back to you."

* * * *

Dempsey: "Michael Easton."

(Michael is a 16-year-old boy who has been signed out of school with his parents' and social worker's consent. He reads on a fourth grade level and is unable to complete a job application. He has had two arrests on nonfelony matters and has frequently been involved in drug and alcohol use. His mother and father are both unemployed and collect disability pensions, and he has two disabled siblings. He refuses to attend any therapy or community counseling.)

O'Neill: "I went by his grandmother's house this morning. She had not seen him. I looked over at the basketball court, I looked at the shopping center. He wasn't at any of them. So I went back to the house to tell his grandmother that I'd keep looking, and just as I was leaving a man in a car pulls up to the house and drops him off. I asked Michael who the guy was and he said, 'Just a guy who offered me a ride.' So I had a long talk with Michael about the dangers of this kind of thing."

Brooks: "How'd he handle it?"

O'Neill: "He kept insisting the guy was O.K. I didn't convince him of anything."

Dempsey: "You'll have to keep at this kid."

McClellan: "We've had trouble before with guys in cars who pick these kids up and ride them home."

Dempsey: "Stay close to Michael and report back."

O'Neill: "I told Michael, 'I'll be back.'"

The process takes this group through all 40 names; a second team goes through an additional 30 names. These "run-downs" are repeated at 4:30 p.m. and at 11:00 p.m. every day. Choice is monitoring 70 young people—working with their parents and guardians continually stressing accountability and responsibility. Contact is made two to five times a day and

well into the evening, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. According to Mark Shriver, Program Director, "What we're doing is coordinating services to our kids and families in a tightly structured approach so that our kids learn to be responsible and they get the services they need."

The Problem That Choice Addresses

The program focuses on one of Maryland's most pressing problems — its management of youth under 18 referred to as "CINS" (Children In Need of Supervision), "delinquents," and "CINA" (Child In Need of Assistance). A CINS child has committed a "status offense," i.e., is truant, ungovernable, or is a runaway. A "delinquent" has committed an offense that would be considered a crime if the youth were an adult, and a CINA is an abused, neglected, abandoned or dependent youth. These troubled youth oftentimes display similar behavior but are labeled differently depending on which state agency works with them.

Although youth between the ages of 13 and 18 constitute 9.2 percent of the nation's population, they account for, according to data that Choice presents, 20.1 percent of all arrests. The costs for police protection, courts and corrections exceed \$45 billion nationally; the cost per child in a residential facility in Maryland might be as high as \$42,000.

Maryland law mandates that these youth be served, but current state programs are overwhelmed and lack the manpower and resources to address successfully the complex problems of the CINA, CINS and delinquent population. State efforts are focused on delinquents judged to be a threat to public safety.

The needs of these youth are different from those of the serious offender. Services appropriate for CINA, CINS and minor delinquents are simply not available. However, if their needs are not addressed, these youth are at risk of becoming involved in violent crime, dealing in drugs, and of becoming dependent on our over-burdened welfare system. As noted by the Regional Planning Council, the problems of troubled youth threaten the economic vitality of the state, since a potential source of human capital

is wasted. If their complex, multi-faceted problems are not addressed, these youth are destined to become, according to the council, "hard core delinquents and members of the permanent underclass."

The Choice program was conceived to address the urgent and costly problems of CINA, CINS and delinquent youth. Following extensive research and consultation with experts in the juvenile justice and social service fields in Maryland and on a national level, Choice was established in 1988 as a model program in the Cherry Hill neighborhood of Baltimore.

How Choice Addresses the Problem

The Choice commitment is to stabilize and bring into the mainstream children whose lives are in a state of disruption resulting from alcoholism, violence, sexual abuse, delinquencies, and other social disorders. Children in these situations do not learn to take care of themselves or to take responsibility; they drop out of school, they run away from home, they commit crimes. They are candidates for foster care and/or reform school.

It is at this point in the lives of these young people where Choice becomes a promising intervention.

The work of Choice is largely the teamwork of the program supervisor, the case managers and the educational support person interacting one-on-one with each of the students in the program. What they do singly and collectively under the supervision of the program director (Mark Shriver) and the executive director (Dr. John Martello) depends on what each of the students is doing, hour-to-hour, in the school, in the home, and in the neighborhood. Their judgments are in part professional and in part common sense; they are judgments a parent with good instincts might make out of a sense of love and caring for a child. The centerpiece of their work with the students day-to-day is the identification, in each case, of the underlying needs of each of the students, and then the linking of support for those needs either with Choice resources or with appropriate community agencies.

One of the agencies is the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The university has developed a model tutoring program in which Choice youth partici-

pate twice a week. The clients are transported to the campus and are provided, first, with a meal; then, in a one-on-one match-up with UMBC community service student volunteers, the Choice clients are provided two hours of tutoring and academic assistance, followed by a one-hour recreational activity. Each of the students is diagnostically tested to determine his or her level of performance.

When the student is ready to be phased out of the intensive program, an adult mentor is assigned to work with him or her on a one-to-one basis. The mentor program is designed to reinforce the positive results thought to have been achieved in the intensive stage of the program and provides an additional role model for the student. This mentor relationship is maintained for up to one year.

But assuming that Choice is "working" as a pilot program, the citizens' ultimate judgment of the effectiveness of the Choice program is the extent to which, in the long run, it can be replicated effectively and made to work on a larger scale. Can it serve larger numbers of students, saving the citizenry meaningful tax dollars while developing the at-risk students into productive, achieving members of the society? Do the economics and sociology work in such a way as to command the interest and attention, and perhaps programming action, of Maryland's social services' leadership? Should money and attention be shifted from the present system of providing service to this population to Choice or to some other program that borrows in whole or in part from the Choice system?

The value of Choice to the community might be thought of as the amount, in numbers of youth and in dollars, that Choice can divert from the state's total case load of residential placements and the cost of supporting residential placements - that is, 1) how many young people can be kept from being taken into the delinquency system and 2) what savings as a consequence are realized when Choice works successfully to keep young people at the low end ("front end") of the service continuum. "On both counts, quite a lot," according to Susan Saperstein, Chief of Staff, Department of Juvenile Services. "Choice can have a significant impact here. Clearly Choice holds the promise of being able to hold many youth, who might move to a higher level where more support is required,

down to the lower and less costly level of support. We save human beings, we save dollars."

"Hypothetically," according to Herbert Goldsmith, Acting Assistant Secretary for Community Services of the State of Maryland, "that impact might work something like this. In a given case, it might cost the State of Maryland \$32,812 to support a year-long length of stay in a residential group home. If the Choice program were to divert that same youth from his or her need for high-cost residential support to a lower level of support, realistically it could serve that same youth for, say, \$7,200. Savings per youth, \$25,612. To say nothing of the less tangible benefits to both the individual and the community when the arrangement works."

"If out of a given 250 youth, Choice could divert 10 percent of them, or 25, that is, keep them in a lower support system, the potential savings to the state would be \$640,300 per year."

But can Choice meet those expectations? Does it have the potential to keep 10 percent of the youth who might be called "ungovernable" ("CINS") serviced at a lower cost while keeping them from becoming delinquent - and requiring services at a higher cost? Can Choice be replicated?

Susan Saperstein, Chief of Staff, Department of Juvenile Services, says, "It's too soon to say. It will take some years to develop the data and come to any kind of realistic conclusion, but the elements are there to make Choice a program that we would likely give serious consideration to taking into the state system. We can be optimistic." Secretary of Juvenile Services, Ms. Linda D'Amario Rossi, surely is. She says, "Choice is doing a terrific job of providing intensive nonresidential services to Department of Juvenile Services youth."

Goldsmith feels that should Choice prove successful, the state could well consider replicating it. "It could be a marriage between the state, UMBC and the private sector. We might well take advantage of Choice by contracting out for the services."

In fiscal year 1991, Choice doubled in size to serve 70 clients at any given time, a positive sign of progress. Goldsmith notes, "No one program is the total answer to the problem. But Choice shows signs that it may well be among the

answers. If there were no Choice, I think we would have to create it.

"The state is watching too many young people moving too quickly from the lower end of the support scale to the upper. The state is watching, too, the lives at stake. And the state is watching dollars."

And the community is watching Choice.

Outside Reading Project

(continued from page 1)

reading requirement that has each student reading two books each month. Every school has used a variety of incentives to encourage students to read, and to read beyond the required number of books: typically, the goal of Ashburton Elementary for the school year was 8,000; the students read 8,453.

The idea for the Outside Reading Project came from inside a school, Lyndhurst Elementary in West Baltimore. There, with help from the Fund for Educational Excellence and Pizza Hut's Book-It program, students read more than 8,500 books on their own last year.

Lyndhurst became one of the 10 elementary schools selected by the school system for this year's project. The other schools are: Armistead Gardens, Ashburton, Gardenville, James McHenry, Morrell Park, Mt. Washington, Northwood, Walter P. Carter, and Westside.

These schools were selected from more than 40 elementary schools which put forward creative proposals for how they would use \$2,000 grants to encourage outside reading. The proposals included specific plans for incentives, motivational activities and record keeping.

Using funds from the grant, the 10 selected schools purchased various materials to support incentives for students. Many schools post stars or stickers for each book a student reads, a public display of which students are fiercely proud. Ashburton uses sashes and buttons for students to "show off" how many books they have read. In some schools, like Mt. Washington, entire classes can win prizes if they reach certain goals. At Armistead Gardens, the goal this past year was 10,000 books; the students fell slightly short, reading 9,549. Three hundred of the students were treated

to the movies; the top five readers went on a sailing trip.

For motivational activities, schools have held various assemblies, to kick off the program, to recognize successful readers, and to continually stimulate the students. Some schools, like Westside and Walter P. Carter, have brought in celebrity readers and well-known children's authors to inspire students to read. At Morrell Park, students are paired together to encourage each other to read.

Each school has developed its own system to both verify that students have actually read the books and to keep track of individual, class and school statistics. Northwood relies on parental signatures on specially designed and printed record sheets. Other schools use short book reports or oral reports for validation.

In addition, participating schools have also had the opportunity to strengthen their ailing libraries, using \$1,500 of the grant to purchase new books. Many schools have raised additional money for books. James McHenry has had particular success raising money for its Delores Diggs Memorial Library. (In the 1986-87 school year, Baltimore City schools received \$3.00 per student for library books, compared with more than double that amount received by Baltimore County schools.)

While the Outside Reading Project is still incomplete, interim reports written by each school reveal that already the 10 schools have proven some of the basic premises upon which these pilots were founded.

First, the pilot schools have demonstrated that if students are asked to read books on their own and given incentives as encouragements, they will read many books.

Second, the 10 projects have shown that if elementary schools require some outside reading, a large majority of the students will comply. Indeed, schools are noticing monthly increases in the percentages of students reading two books per month.

Third, the project has demonstrated again the power of school-based staffs to make significant accomplishments using their own energy and creativity.

Fourth, the project has demonstrated what can be done with very little money.

In the upcoming months, schools will continue to promote outside reading and refine their projects, using lessons

they are learning on a daily basis about what works and what does not. Many principals are convinced that the dramatic increase in extracurricular reading will be reflected in improved reading skills, hopefully revealed in standardized test scores.

Interim Statistics on the Outside Reading Project

School	Roll '88-'89	# of Books As of Dec.	% Reading Two Books/Month
Armistead Gardens	406	2,970	58%
Ashburton	252	2,800	53%
Gardenville	349	2,500	100%(approx.)
James McHenry	578	N/A	90%
Lyndhurst	448	4,607	70%
Morrell Park	97*	500	90%
Mt. Washington	343	1,000+	91%
Northwood	707	2,742	63%
Walter P. Carter	507	3,443	95-99%
Westside	659	3,350	90-100%

*'87-'88 roll
*4th and 5th graders

Support for the value of the Outside Reading Project (or any program designed to encourage young students to read more) is provided by a 1985 study, "A Nation of Readers," published by the U.S. Department of Education. According to Robert Stevens, a research scientist at the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at the Johns Hopkins University, the study makes clear that 1) young children who read more early in their school experience enjoy higher achievement throughout the rest of their schooling, in particular, on standardized tests including the California Achievement Test, and 2) young children who read more tend to watch television less, and thus avoid the learning pitfalls often associated with extensive watching of television.

The Baltimore City Public School system is working with The Abell Foundation on a plan to expand this program to 20 additional elementary schools, four middle schools and four high schools, as a prelude to a systemwide promotion of outside reading. From all of the evidence, the Outside Reading program is proving itself a measurably successful, and highly commendable, effort at motivating this special population on the value, and the joys, of reading.

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