

New school for problem kids will lean on founder's track record

EDUCATION

Emphasis will be on giving back to the community

BY LAURA PETERSON

How do you turn the most chronic and violent juvenile criminals into proud, productive members of society? By teaching them to bake scones, to haul lumber, and to fix a car, along with good old math and English.

That's the philosophy behind the Life Learning Academy, the latest addition to the San Francisco Unified School District's cadre of charter schools. Pioneered by Mimi Silbert, the force behind the Delancey Street Foundation, the school will provide academic and rehabilitative programs for 60 delinquent youths by using the same methodology that has made Delancey Street one of the most successful and imitated drug and alcohol programs in the country: Learn by doing and give back to the community that teaches you. Self-respect comes from being able to give back to those who have given to you.

"It's a reciprocal process," says Silbert. "Kids need to learn how to give — they should not just be passive receivers. We want a student

that doesn't just passively learn but who learns through projects that he or she is creating for the benefit of other students, for their teachers, for the world," she says.

The academy is a project of the San Francisco Juvenile Justice Plan, a collaboration among numerous city law-enforcement and social-service agencies that aims to overhaul the fragmented and uncoordinated juvenile-justice system. Silbert, who holds doctorates in criminology and psychology, was invited to join the task force behind the plan because of her success with Delancey Street, which she helped found in 1971. In addition to having a low participant relapse rate, Delancey Street is completely self-sufficient. It is financed by several business ventures, such as a restaurant, moving company, and marketing firm, all completely staffed by program residents.

Giving a way to give back

Between November 1996 and March 1997, the task force interviewed more than 400 people in the juvenile-justice system in regard to how they thought the system should change. It also conducted "simulated placement" exercises in which groups of participants, including parents and youths as well as probation officers and judges, met for hours to come up with "ideal" placements

for every youth in custody.

After all the data was in, the task force came to essentially the same conclusion that Silbert arrived at years ago: that when offenders acquire skills that allow them to give back to the community, they develop a sense of responsibility and self-worth along with practical abilities that will help them find a place in society.

"A lot of people think that to help criminal offenders you just need to give and give and give them services," said Eugene Clendinen of the Mayor's Criminal Justice Council. "What they actually need is responsibility, accountability, and ownership of what they did so they're not just taking all the time — they're part of the healing process," he said.

Further findings

The task force also found that though serious and violent offenders comprise only 10 percent of youths in crime, they commit 75 percent of all serious juvenile offenses. It is this 10 percent that Life Learning Academy aims to serve. Under the charter-school proposal, 60 boys and girls already in the juvenile-justice system can voluntarily choose the program as an alternative to group homes or institutions. Students will be enrolled in the school for varying lengths of time, during which they will participate in

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group counseling, academics, and recreational activities in addition to what silbert calls "life skills" classes, where they study manners, dress, and other codes of mainstream society.

But alongside their math, science, and English instruction, students will partake in a variety of vocational programs with the hands-on Silbert touch. First, the students will help rehabilitate the school's future home in the YMCA on Golden Gate Avenue, guided by licensed contractors. Silbert says she has lined up several executives, from the local Bank of America chairman to the CEO of the Gap, Inc., to talk to students about the worlds of finance and economics. Students can also work at a cafe in the building, where they will not only cook food but package and sell it.

Filling a need

Though the school district has been criticized for diverting resources into the increasing number of charter schools, Board of Education members praised the proposal when they approved it January 13 for filling what they admitted was a sizable gap. "The inability to do a better job in reaching these students has been my single greatest frustration on



Mimi Silbert

this board," said board member Steve Phillips. "No one has ever come forward before and really said, "We want to dedicate ourselves to working with the students who have been forgotten. I'm delighted to see a proposal which finally speaks to these students" he said.

Silbert hopes to get the school up and running this spring, after a seismic review of the YMCA building is completed. Planners are still ironing out the details of how students will be admitted to the school, though Silbert knows she would like to see their numbers grow.

"I hope to make it one day the kind of place where there are 6,000 students trying to get in because it's fun, it's exciting, it's productive," she said.