

Chapter 12

Assets: A Social Justice Perspective

The secret to the success of the program is its ability to make use of Chicago's most undervalued assets: throw-away kids, throw-away parents, and throw-away computers. — Calvin Pearce

SCHOOLS AND THROW-AWAY KIDS

At night, Calvin Pearce is an engineer who maintains all systems for the giant communications firm, Ameritech. By day, he runs the Time Dollar Cross-Age Peer Tutoring program in Chicago.

Back in 1995, when Mayor Richard Daley decided to reform public education, he appointed his chief budget officer, Paul Vallas, to be the CEO. Chicago's record at that point was just as bad as Washington, D.C.'s—and Washington, D.C., ranked 51st in the nation.

I asked Paul Vallas how he was going to change that: "You have the same kids, the same teachers, same buildings, same textbooks, same families. What's going to change?"

I had a problem with his solution: bringing in 10,000 tutors from the outside. The research shows that outside tutors help individuals, but they don't necessarily change the system. What Dr. James Comer points out is that kids don't learn because they are afraid of rejection from their peers. It's dangerous to seek the approval of a teacher. You get labeled a nerd—or worse.

So I said, "The research shows that cross-age peer tutoring works—older kids tutoring younger kids. Give me some of the schools in one of your most troubled neighborhoods on the South Side. Give me schools in Englewood."

Englewood had been dubbed a killing zone. We had to make it safe for

a kid to be caught learning. The quickest way to do that was to get older kids to reward younger kids with praise for getting right answers. That would make it better than safe to learn; that would buy them approval and (as we found out) actual physical protection.

So Vallas gave us a chance. The first year, five elementary schools in Englewood; the next year, ten, because the first year was so successful. Now it's up to twenty-five schools.

That first year, when I walked through the school cafeteria at Parker, there were 200 kids after school. The principal used a bullhorn to quiet them and then handed out assignments. After that, all one heard was a quiet buzz—lots of kids talking quietly to each other—but no yelling, no running up and down the aisles. Just kids really interested in what they were doing.

I went up to a kid who was simultaneously grading a math quiz, checking the answers on a science test, and testing his tutee on spelling. "How do you do all of that?" I asked, "That's real multi-tasking." He looked at me with a "What's your problem" look, as if to say, "Isn't that the way everyone does it?"

Later on, I sat with a group of older students who had been tutors, to find out what they had learned when helping the younger kids.

The first one said, "I learned that when my tutee asked me a question, I had better write it down, to make sure I answered it."

A second hand went up. "I learned that when I asked my tutee a question, I had to make him repeat the question first before he answered it."

A third didn't wait to be recognized. "I learned some of these kids are hard-headed." And I thought, this one will empathize with his teacher much more now.

A fourth very shy, thin girl in the front row looked up from under long lashes and said hesitantly, "I learned that when my kid did her homework well, I should stick a label on the paper and write, 'You are a smart kid,' so that she could take it home and show it to her mother."

And a fifth kid then poked out his chest and said: "I learned there are words inside of words."

I thought, "That's deep."

Later, the school psychologist told me this was the first time she could remember that the school system had spent any money on just plain "ordinary" kids—not problem kids, just kids trying to hang in there and do what they were told to do.

That had never occurred to me. At the beginning, the principals all asked whether we wanted just the bright students, the honor students, as tutors. Sylvan Learning Centers had been awarded a huge contract, and their approach was to try to take the brightest students and teach them how to tutor. It didn't work, but we didn't know that at the time. We just said "No."

So we got anyone who volunteered and stuck it out. Some had already been classified special education kids, attention deficit kids, problem kids. But everyone flocked to us because we made an offer: We promised a recycled computer to every student who earned 100 Time Dollars in the tutoring program. A lot of the kids who volunteered had already been programmed by the system to believe that they were no rocket scientists. They already knew how the system viewed them: They just didn't have it and would never make it.

The decision to accept all who volunteered proved to be a special blessing—though we can claim no credit for that. When these kids, whose self-esteem was at rock bottom, looked at a homework assignment for a first or second grader, it looked easy to them. And so they figured that if they could do it, anyone could do it. The result was that they imposed high expectations on the first and second graders.

Remember, these are the throw-away kids. Suddenly, they had become educators, teachers—co-producers of learning. And they had something that no teacher, no adult, has. They are peers—and better yet, older peers. Every kid seems to want praise and approval and acceptance from an older kid.

The older kids made it fun to learn. We found out from the principals that attendance actually went up on days when after-school tutoring took place. Kids came to school in order to tutor or be tutored.

The older kids also made it safe to learn, on two levels. Peer acceptance was either automatic or irrelevant. Either peer rejection didn't happen, or it lost its power to prevent learning when something better—an older kid's praise, approval and friendship—could be earned by learning, performing, trying over and over again. Peer tutoring made learning safe in a different way. The bullying and after-school fighting stopped. It was to be expected that tutors wouldn't beat up their tutees; what we hadn't anticipated was that they wouldn't let anyone else do that, either. Learning bought you a protector. Not bad.

Something else was happening, as well. Some of these not-so-special older students started to get good grades for the first time. It takes higher-order skills to teach lower-order skills. So these older kids were not only brushing up on their basics and building a better foundation; they were doing problem solving, practicing communication skills, framing and testing hypotheses as to what it would take to get their tutee to learn. Small wonder that those skills began to show up in their own studies.

Parents were another "throw-away" player. For most of them, coming to school was associated with unpleasant memories—from their own childhood as students, and again as parents being given bad news about their kids. So the rules for participation were written to require a parental contribution. Even after earning 100 Time Dollars, no child could take home a computer until a parent had earned 8 Time Dollars. You had better believe that no parent knew any peace at home—until they had done what they needed to do. But the joy on these parents' faces, and their sense of

pride in having helped their child get a computer, spoke volumes—to us and to their kids.

One mother told me that the only time she had been to the school before that was to get bad reports on her child's performance and that until now she had dreaded coming to the school. Now, she had come to help out. She felt enormous pride in seeing her own child helping younger children. And her job had been simply to walk up and down the aisle to see if anyone needed help.

One seventh-grader's mother had died two months before it was time for him to get his computer. He hadn't seen his father for six years, but he was so determined to claim what he had earned that he hunted him down. The father, proud to be reunited with his son, earned the eight Time Dollars needed. He didn't stop there, though; he decided to take over as parent, full time, permanently.

The first year, we lost one kid to a gang shooting. His parents came to us with two requests: Would we be sure to include in the boy's obituary that he was a tutor and was working to earn a computer?—because that's how they felt he would have wanted to be remembered. And would we let his younger brother take over where he left off? They wanted those Time Dollars to be a kind of legacy so that the younger brother could finish earning the computer by building on the Time Dollars his older brother had earned. You never know what's going to hit you hardest, the triumph or the tears. But you know that there's no going back.

The tangible reward itself seemed to have a special poetry to it. We rounded up old computers that no one else wanted from military bases, insurance companies, law firms and wherever we could find them. First it was 286s, then 386s; now it's 486s and 586s. Y2K has turned a stream into a torrent. And as the new 64-bit operating system comes on line, kids will just have to make do with throw-away Pentium MMX's. Those throw-away computers can help bridge the great and growing digital divide between the haves and the have-nots in this new Information Age.

The real reward, though, is not the computer but what earning that computer symbolizes. It says, *You can create for yourself a new future—by helping others*. It means that we have the power to reclaim throw-away kids, throw-away parents, and throw-away computers—and to create a genuine learning community with no limits. That's happening. It's powered by kids and computers and parents helping oversee their kids' functioning as educators. All paid for by the Chicago Public School System, and embraced by teachers and principals who say it's just what they needed, just what was missing.

These kids have changed from passive consumers (or non-consumers) of education into active co-producers. They have reconfigured the world of relevant approval: Their praise and acceptance were sufficiently powerful to overcome fear of peer rejection as a deterrent to learning. Even better, somehow that deterrent never materialized. They had made coming to

school, and learning, safe.

When kids, older and younger, became co-producers, they changed the product, the production process, and the production work force. Kids were no longer merely future adults. The focus was not on what they lacked. They were not empty vessels to fill, cracked vessels to repair, or defective merchandise that the public school triage system relegated to the scrap heap. They were producers, earners, learners, mentors. And they had proof. In fact, they had three kinds of proof: a Time Dollar bank statement recording their hours; a computer, a symbol of approval so important and so valid that even their parents had been willing to earn some Time Dollars to get it and bring it home; and one or more new buddies—a tutor they could look up to, or a tutee they could point to whom they had helped and would protect.

In a landmark Supreme Court case, Justice Potter Stewart declared that even if he could not define Obscenity, he knew it when he saw it. The Time Dollar Cross-Age Peer Tutoring program meets that intuitive knowledge standard. We may still be groping for a satisfactory definition of Co-Production, but we know Assets and we know Co-Production when we see them. And we've seen them both in action in Chicago.

COURTS AND THROW-AWAY JUVENILES

Question by Time Dollar Youth Court juror: *Where will you be in five years?*

Answer by Respondent: *Dead or locked up.*

In Washington, D.C., over 50 percent of young black males between the ages of 18 and 24 are currently under court jurisdiction, in prison, on parole, or on probation. The so-called juvenile justice system is the feeder, the supply line. The journey starts with a juvenile's first brush with the law and the response he gets. Typically, the prosecutor's office simply "No papers" the case. After all, overburdened prosecutors have more important things to worry about than a mere first offense. They have to deal with hardened criminals, repeat offenders.

But that first "No Paper" sends a message that young people read loud and clear: "You get three freebies before anyone takes you seriously." And every one knows that doesn't mean three illegal acts. It means three times getting caught.

That's how the journey begins. By the third arrest, a formal juvenile proceeding functions more as a rite of passage. For male teenagers it is almost a macho ritual, a test of manhood, not a chance to choose a different path. Without meaning to, the juvenile justice system has been turning young kids into hardened criminals faster than any gang in town. observation in 1995 with D.C. Superior Court's