

Mississippi National Guard Offers Educational Alternatives For At-Risk Youth

Educating the youth in our great state remains a top priority in my administration. We are dedicated to ensuring that each child in Mississippi receives a quality education that will afford him or her the opportunity to succeed.

Mississippi's youth are Mississippi's future. Unfortunately, hope for the future is being lost by many of our state's youth who are dropping out of high school at an alarming rate. These high-risk youth are unlikely to finish high school or find meaningful employment, and ultimately become at-risk for substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and involvement in criminal activities. Studies find that over 28 percent of youth in this category receive some form of state or federal assistance.

The Mississippi National Guard is working diligently to reduce this at-risk population with the Youth Challenge Program at Camp Shelby, Miss. ChalleNGe is a 22-week residential program that offers high school dropouts the opportunity to earn an Adult High School Diploma, a High School Equivalency Diploma (GED), or a Certificate of Completion. The residential phase teaches self-discipline, leadership and responsibility, along with a curriculum that combines classroom work, community service, physical training, and challenging individual and team activities. A 12-month post residential phase assists graduates in enrollment in continued education, a technical school program, an entry-level job, or a branch of the military.

ChalleNGe accepts high school dropouts, ages 16-18. Qualified applicants must be residents of Mississippi, free from drugs, have no felony convictions, and most importantly, have a desire to complete the rigors of the military style program. It is purely voluntary and no one can be court ordered to attend.

Accepted students are called "cadets," and are enrolled in a curriculum that revolves around the program's eight-core components: life coping skills; educational excellence; responsible citizenship; job training; leadership; health, hygiene and sex education; physical fitness; and community projects. Students live in military barracks and are supervised at all times.

Sound successful? It is. To date, over 2,300 students have graduated from the Youth Challenge Program since its inception in 1994. The program has a 97.6 percent success rate of graduates entering college, the work force or the military. Each year, the program receives national accolades, and in 1998, was selected by the National Guard Bureau in Washington as the best all-around Youth Challenge Program in the country.

The huge success of the Youth Challenge Program is directly attributed to the professionalism and dedication of the men and women of the Mississippi National Guard. The Mississippi National Guard has proved itself time-and-time again in training

missions, overseas deployments, and in programs here at home designed to increase the quality of life for fellow Mississippians.

The program graduates nearly 400 cadets in two classes each year with a shared commitment from the state and federal levels. This combination of state and federal dollars will ensure an opportunity for these students to better their lives and become more productive citizens for our future.

Our state legislature who appropriated the necessary funds to help make this program a success should be commended. They see the benefit of this program to the youth of our state. Congratulations also to Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. James H. Lipscomb, his staff, and all the men and women of the Mississippi National Guard for making the Youth Challenge Program the success that it is today.