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Investment in children reaps priceless rewards

Monday, August 29, 2005

Patricee Martin-Caldwell was a 12-year-old going on high-school dropout when she entered the Step Up program.

"I used to never go to school, never," says Martin-Caldwell, the oldest of six. "Or I'd be late because I wanted to miss my reading and math classes."

She refused to do homework. She didn't get along with her middle-school teachers. And she was a troublemaker who was told she needs to take prescription pills to help her concentrate.

Step Up, which serves North Portland students in the Roosevelt High School district, assigned her a peer counselor and an adult tutor. Martin-Caldwell was also encouraged to step up to her responsibility to make the right choices.

"We get to the bottom of what's going on in their lives," says Hanif Fazal, program director and co-founder. Whether it's sexual or physical violence or their parents' alcohol or drug abuse, middle schoolers learn "what are new ways for one now to begin dealing with this stuff," Fazal says. "Now, they have the support, so it's really up to them."

All over Portland, children are growing up in dysfunctional environments that are grooming them to be dropouts, social failures and gang members. But they're finding hope, inspiration and direction through programs assisted by the Children's Investment Fund.

Portland voters approved the five-year levy in November 2002. But news of where taxpayers' money was being spent was hard to find. Now, the fund has an aggressive marketing director, a Web site -- www.childrensinvestmentfund.org -- and \$3 million to spare. Its first annual report will be published in the spring.

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who created, promoted and leads the fund, plans to use the extra \$3 million to corral more private investment into Portland's proven child-advocacy programs. The leverage fund's first partnership is with the Harold and Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation. The money, \$375,000 from each, will be deposited into the Boys & Girls Clubs of Portland.

About \$16 million has been spent so far on 42 after-school, mentoring, child-abuse prevention and early childhood development programs.

Cascade AIDS Project, for example, worked with an additional 220 children affected and infected with HIV. The Immigration & Refugee Community Organization added new parent-education classes for 480 immigrants with limited English-speaking skills.

And the Children's Relief Nursery expanded its parent-support services for 100 victims of child abuse. What's more, Big Brothers Big Sisters used its grant to start a mentoring program for 103 children in foster care, which brought the agency national recognition.

The sad thing is, we're still only making a dent of an impact. About 40 percent of Portland's children are poor. More than 41 percent of our eighth-graders cannot read at grade level. And one-third of the homeless street youth we're seeing downtown were in the state's foster-care system.

We're still failing far too many of our children. But, at least, we're helping 10,000 more than we used to. That's why Saltzman plans to put a levy renewal on next year's ballot.

"I'd like to see it at the same level," he says. "Maybe even more."

For now, Portlanders ought to pat themselves on the back. We have done something most cities never thought of doing: We're decreasing the potential of our children ending up in poverty, arrested for some crime or strung out on drugs. And we're increasing the likelihood that more of them will be literate, employed and socially responsible.

After participating in Step Up, for example, Martin-Caldwell, now age 13, is caught up to her grade level in math and reading. She's more focused and interested in school, all without pills. And her career goal has graduated from hairdresser to neonatal nurse.

"I love it so much," she says about the Step Up program. "You have people to talk to. You have people to depend on; people you can trust. Sometimes, parents can't do all that."

Portland can't do it all either. But thank God, we are doing what we can.

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