

Posted on Sun, Aug. 07, 2005
GUEST COMMENTARY

Support our economy by supporting youths

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OUR CHILDREN are our future. Societies have been judged by the way they treat their most vulnerable members.

These two principles are being brought to life together in a powerful way through a new initiative of the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County.

In May, Contra Costa's Workforce Development Board launched a program aimed at taking at-risk youth through an extensive education and training program to improve their skills and lead them on a pathway to a promising career in one of the county's high-growth industries.

The new program, the Walter S. Johnson Contra Costa County Gateway for Disadvantaged Youth Project, is held over the course of 14 weeks at Contra Costa College and Los Medanos College.

The program's first graduates, a group of 22 Contra Costa County young people 16 to 21 years of age from every ethnic background, were given a second chance and celebrated their successful graduation from the program at Los Medanos College on July 28 and Monday at Contra Costa College.

These young people have had to overcome difficult challenges in their lives. Some of them have been involved in gang activity, others have overcome substance abuse, some have been in the foster care system and most are from homes where their parents have struggled with similar issues.

All of them are from homes that qualify for assistance from the Federal Workforce Investment Act.

The students receive transportation to the program that begins at 8 a.m. They stay through lunch and until 2 p.m. when their training day ends. Toward the conclusion of their 14-week program, they have the opportunity to work in the afternoons and evenings at local community youth centers where they help younger kids by tutoring, mentoring and helping them in other ways.

They are paid for this afterschool work activity and receive transportation home at night.

Most of the money for this great program is from a grant secured by the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

More money is needed to cover unexpected expenses such as the transportation service that has proved to be so necessary and the costs of providing meals.

At the end of the program, each student meets with a career counselor to plan his or her career path. A counselor encourages them to enter one of Contra Costa County's identified high-growth employment pathways, including manufacturing/refining, construction, health care, bioscience or early childhood education.

The Gateway Project represents the convergence of efforts by the foster care system, the community colleges and the workforce development system.

This program will help create a workforce prepared to service those industries in our county that have been identified to need future employees to sustain our economy.

We call upon our county's good corporate citizens to step up and help support this very meaningful and productive project.

By supporting this effort, you will not only receive the gratitude of the young adults who will benefit from this program, but you will have contributed to helping build the future workforce of our county and will be making our economy stronger.

Gioia is a Contra Costa County supervisor. For more information on the Walter S. Johnson Contra Costa County Gateway for Disadvantaged Youth Project contact him at 510-374-3231 or e-mail dist1@bos.cccounty.us.