

ABQJournal Online » Academic Turnaround

High school was torture for Brittany Segura. She was in a free fall to failure and on her way to becoming a dropout, when she decided as a last resort to enroll in a dropout prevention program called Quantum Opportunities.

Now, two years later, she's not only on track to graduate next year from West Mesa High School, but she's also got designs on college and eventually, a possible career in criminal justice .

"I was the kid with a low grade-point average. I was skipping class, causing distractions," Segura said. "I hated the teachers because they'd get mad if I didn't understand the material. When I ditched class, I'd miss out on class time and couldn't understand any assignments when I finally decided to go back to class.

"Looking back, I knew that I wasn't stupid or worthless," Segura said in an interview. "I just needed someone to tell me that they believed in me."

Enter Quantum Opportunities. The 3-year-old program, offered through Youth Development Inc., demonstrated its belief in her by recognizing and helping her to develop her hidden potential, associate director Concha Cordova said.

"Brittany has a good mind and a voice," said program case manager Marisol Campos. "We just helped her to find her voice."

The program helps students by teaching them valuable social skills, guiding them through academic programs and giving them self-confidence.

Segura was like a lot of kids who come from low-income families, facing various obstacles to education and employment, said program director Natalie Chavez.

Working with 30 selected students from West Mesa, the Quantum Opportunities Program in Albuquerque is one of only 10 such programs nationwide. Designated a model program, it received funding from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, with additional funding from the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice. The program has received \$304,000 in three years.

Alan Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation, said he's been impressed by results reported at the Albuquerque program.

Meanwhile, according to data released recently by the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, Hispanic students are five times more likely than Anglos to be suspended from Albuquerque schools, Cordova said. She added that most students in the program are Hispanic.

National studies also show that over-reliance on suspensions, arrests and expulsions of students leads to low academic achievement, a higher dropout rate and later, more serious potential outcomes, such as higher rates of crime, violence, poverty, premature health problems, death and incarceration, Cordova said.

"Here in Albuquerque, all of the kids (in the program) were potential dropouts, low achievers, with low scores and high absenteeism rates," Campos said.

To counter those effects, the program provides homework assistance, tutoring, mentoring, leadership training, case management and community involvement. For example, students during the past 2 1/2 years have built greenhouses and storage sheds for nonprofits and volunteered to

help plant community gardens. Students receive a stipend of \$1.25 an hour, which is covered by the foundation.

Many students also work at part-time jobs.

They learn values such as hard work, trustworthiness and commitment, Campos said.

Nearly 95 percent of participants are still in the program, with most on track to graduate from West Mesa by next year. Many have significantly improved their grades, and juniors in the group are preparing to take their ACT tests for college, Campos said. The program has helped to keep kids out of trouble with the law, and most go on to college or career, she added.

“All of these young people have had difficult challenges, but because of the Quantum Program, they can now see their dreams and can feel confident about achieving them,” she said.

Campos said she frequently takes students to tour the University of New Mexico campus, with visits to Zimmerman Library or the duck pond, so they can visualize themselves in college.

It’s working, Segura said.

“Now I’m setting goals for myself and always keeping a positive outlook,” Segura said. “Now I feel like the whole world is opening up for me.”

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Reprint story



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