

*From the Baltimore Sun*

## **A second chance and a brighter future**

**Gregory Kane**

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Before he entered the Quantum Opportunities Program, Darwin Ajin said he was about to quit school.

Ajin, 16, is a junior at Herndon High School in Virginia. His parents are immigrants from Guatemala who moved to the Washington suburb. Two years ago, before he joined QOP, Ajin said he was making F's and D's in all his subjects. He noticed some of his friends went to QOP, located in an apartment complex three miles from the high school, to get help with their homework. One of his teachers asked Ajin if he wanted to be part of the program. He agreed.

Those F's and D's are now B's and A's, Ajin said.

"Instead of messing around in the streets, there's a place where I can go and stay out of trouble," Ajin said. "Instead of going home, I had teachers there motivating me."

The idea for QOP came from the Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America, in Philadelphia. The program has expanded to Mississippi, Alabama, New Hampshire, South Carolina, the District of Columbia and Herndon, Va. Yes, there are plans for one to start in Baltimore this fall.

QOP is funded by the Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington-based organization with the goal of alleviating racial, social and economic inequities through programs that have been proven to work. That may be one reason why QOP is still in the experimental stage.

There are only 20 students in Herndon's program. That's by design. Amy McFarland, the director of Herndon's QOP, said most of the students were selected four years ago at random. The only criterion was that all the students were having trouble academically or were otherwise considered "at risk."

Another 20 students form a control group and are not in the program. When Herndon's QOP ends this school year, the Eisenhower Foundation will evaluate data showing how students in QOP performed versus the control group.

The Eisenhower Foundation's 20th anniversary brochure, "The Challenges Within," summarizes the results of a comparison between program participants and the control group in the first QOP endeavor:

- 63 percent of the Quantum participants graduated from high school;
- 42 percent were enrolled in post-secondary education or training;
- 23 percent dropped out of school;
- 24 percent had children; and
- 7 percent had arrest records.

By contrast, of the control group:

- 42 percent finished high school;
- 16 percent went on to post-secondary education;
- 15 percent dropped out;
- 38 percent had children; and
- 13 percent had arrest records.

Two students who had poor grades before joining the Herndon QOP are now thinking about post-secondary education.

Talesha Burke, who's been in QOP for two years, was used to getting F's and D's in a couple of troublesome courses, mainly math. She said all her grades, even in math, are now A's or B's. Burke, a 17-year-old senior, plans to enroll at Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina as a biology or pre-med major.

Janett Gonzalez, 17, regularly earned D's and F's in her middle school classes, so her counselor told her mother that enrolling at QOP at Herndon High might help her. As a Herndon freshman, with the help of QOP, those D's and F's changed to B's. Gonzalez, now a senior, plans to attend Northern Virginia Community College in the fall.

One of the advantages of QOP is the financial assistance students get for college. The Herndon QOP center is open from 2:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 2:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Friday. Students are paid \$1.33 an hour for each hour they participate in the program.

That doesn't sound like much. But you haven't heard the good part yet.

The Eisenhower Foundation matches each dollar students earn and puts it in a separate account for college or post-secondary training schools. There are opportunities for \$100 bonuses for things like perfect attendance and performing well academically. Some quick math shows that students who are enrolled in QOP for the entire four years and attend every day can have at least \$4,000 by the time they're ready for college.

Students don't come every afternoon, but McFarland said QOP staffers encourage them to make it at least two or three nights a week.

"You see more benefits that way," McFarland said.

Ajin, Burke and Gonzalez will no doubt give McFarland a hearty "Amen!" to that.

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