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Idaho National Guard program aims to steer high school dropouts back in right direction

Funding is the biggest obstacle for an Idaho Guard program that aims to steer kids back in the right direction.

BY KATHLEEN KRELLER - kkreller@idahostatesman.com

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Idaho's high school dropouts could soon have another option to help get their academic and personal lives back on track — from Idaho's citizen soldiers.

On the very last day of the Idaho Legislature, lawmakers approved a program called the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program. Amid rancorous debate over school reform and funding in Idaho, the Idaho National Guard quietly labored behind the scenes with lawmakers to get the school project off the ground.

The Guard plans to take over an unused school in the rural Idaho town of Pierce to create a boot camp-style academy for high school dropouts.

For years, the Guard has worked to get federal dollars to launch the youth challenge. Local organizers this year managed to make it to the top of the list for a \$1 million grant.

The project hinged on whether the Legislature would grant the Guard authority to start the academy with those federal dollars and private donations. Without approval, the Guard would have slipped to the bottom of the waiting list.

"I am relieved," said Maj. Gen. Gary Saylor, Idaho adjutant general. "It's not like the members of the Legislature didn't like or want the program. ... Because of the budget, there was some thought ... no new programs would be started with already significant cuts in education."

The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program targets at-risk youth who are unemployed, drug-free dropouts between 16 and 18 years old. A 22-week residential program is followed by a year of mentoring with volunteers — often Guard members — from their own community. The program focuses on academics and life coping skills. Most cadets will leave the program with enough credits to go back to high school or get a GED. There are Youth ChalleNGe programs in 27 states and Puerto Rico.

The theory behind the program is to give back to the community and divert drop-out teens from a destructive, expensive path, organizers say.

According to the Idaho Department of Correction, academic failure is the single biggest risk factor for those coming into prison and courts; 42 percent of Idaho inmates don't have a high school diploma or GED.

Further, three-quarters of adult inmates have spent time in juvenile probation, ITD said.

The challenge program could also save the state money, officials said.

"Despite Idaho's education network and ranking ... we still have over 5,000 dropouts in Idaho," Saylor said. "This is another program to either educate those kids or get them back in high school, to get them out of corrections system, off the welfare roles and contributing as taxpayers."

In not-so-rural Bend, Ore., Dan Radabaugh keeps a close watch on the 320 cadets currently working their way through the youth challenge program he directs.

Unlike Idaho's, Oregon's program is modeled after traditional high school, so it gets state education dollars. Since its launch in 1994, the program has had 4,300 graduates, Radabaugh said.

"Every cadet is going to earn something while they are here," Radabaugh said.

"It is a military model we use, very demanding, very structured," Radabaugh said. "A lot of the cadets thrive in this program because it is something they were lacking. It is 'yes ma'am, yes sir.'"

When the cadets graduate, they take with them an action plan to help them reach goals, whether it is college, finding a job or buying a car.

For a year after, people from their hometowns help them achieve their plans.

"You see kids coming in this program really struggling, just got off on the wrong foot in education," Radabaugh said. "Here we give them the individual help they need. When they come to us they are broken. ... The path they were on they would probably be a burden to society."

Radabaugh also cautions against considering the program as a military recruiting tool.

"If this were a recruiting program, it would be the worst one ever developed," he said. "A very small percentage of our youth go into the military."

Currently, between 5 and 10 percent of Oregon's challenge program graduates want to go into the military, he said.

Back in Idaho, the Guard has enough money to get the program on its feet. To keep the program going, and to keep getting federal dollars, the Guard will have to come up with a steady stream of private donations.

"We are fairly comfortable the money is there between the federal input and a donation from the (J.A. and Kathryn) Albertson Foundation," said Col. Tim Marsano, spokesman for the Idaho Guard. "We expect that we might be able to get more money from other private donors."

Since the state isn't contributing money to the school, cadets can't get a high school diploma. And given the state's school and funding situation, lawmakers gave themselves an out. The bill says that the governor and Legislature can discontinue the program if money isn't available.

After the first year, the Guard needs \$900,000 to keep it going. The Albertson Foundation has offered half of that amount for the program's first four years.

"We believe if the school is up and running and performing like it should be, they would look at a longer-term commitment," Sayler said.

Sayler said he'd like to launch Idaho's program in July 2012 with a first class of about 120 students.

To get there, he needs to come up with about \$300,000 in private donations, after lawmakers denied the use of that amount from the Department of Commerce. The Guard is working now to form a nonprofit organization.

Sayler also needs to hire an administrator and marketers to get students in the door. And the program needs some temporary trailers as dormitory space until it has enough money to build housing.

The school itself needs a few updates, like wiring, to ready it for modern technology. But it is basically ready-to-go space, said Marsano.

"It's all in such good shape," Marsano said. "It means just going in and turning on the lights."

Beyond a boon to teens in need of direction, the school also could provide 50 jobs in and around Pierce, Marsano said.

And the rural location means added benefits to students in the form of "fewer distractions" for cadets, including a lack of cellphone service.

Ultimately, the Guard would like to look at becoming an alternative high school offering a diploma and get state funding.

"We are all citizens in Idaho and we all have a stake in this," Sayler said.

"This is just another way the Guard is part of the community and part of the state and a way we can help these kids in these communities out."

Kathleen Kreller: 377-6418