

Workforce training of parents boosts children's aspirations

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Eloina Serna wasn't the only one in her family who benefited when she signed up with Capital IDEA, a nonprofit organization in Austin that provides financial assistance, academic counseling and other help to low-income people pursuing higher education.

Serna earned a nursing degree at Austin Community College and landed a job with a drug-testing company, and her son, Jeremiah White, drew inspiration from her success. At the ripe age of 12, he's planning to become a cardiologist, having already dropped an interest in law.

"There's a ton of lawyers out there, and it might be difficult for me to get a job," said Jeremiah, who is earning all A's except for one B in his seventh-grade classes at Cedar Valley Middle School in the Round Rock school district.

Officials at Capital IDEA — the group's full name is Capital Investing in Development and Employment of Adults Inc. — have long had a sense from anecdotal accounts that the children of participants benefit from a college-going culture that seems to take root in their households. Now, thanks in part to a research project by a student at Southwestern University in Georgetown, a stronger case can be made.

Kristen McCollum, a senior majoring in sociology at Southwestern, surveyed 78 people who earned degrees or certificates from ACC with support from Capital IDEA. She found that 90 percent of their children who are now 18 or older earned a high school diploma and that 64 percent of those children have earned a college degree or are currently enrolled.

Capital IDEA graduates also reported having higher academic expectations for their children, and the children said they had increased academic goals as well, the survey found. Children who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups were especially likely to have increased goals.

Capital IDEA officials and other observers said the results are especially encouraging because studies show that students from low-income families are less likely to apply to college than their higher-income counterparts.

"Stories have been popping up for three or four years now that the kids of Capital IDEA participants were probably doing better than their peers," said Chris King, director of the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources at the University of Texas' Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. The Southwestern student's survey involved a relatively small sample, so a fuller study is warranted, he said.

Steve Jackobs, executive director of Capital IDEA, said it stands to reason that children of graduates would have an easier time navigating the sometimes-daunting task of applying to college and seeking financial aid.

"These folks who are college graduates are now able to guide their children," Jackobs said. "They're the case manager. They're playing the same role as other parents who went to college."

Tom Wilken, vice president of human resource services at the Seton Healthcare Family and a member of Capital IDEA's board, summed up the findings this way: "It's kind of a two-for-one investment."

Capital IDEA was founded in 1998 by Austin Interfaith, a coalition of religious congregations, in partnership with

Central Texas business leaders. It focuses on lifting families out of poverty through workforce training, especially in high-demand occupations such as health care, information technology, utilities and skilled trades.

The program covers expenses for tuition, books, child care and transportation, and provides tutoring and other academic support that can be crucial to students' academic success. Participants also get help applying for federal and state financial aid. Capital IDEA serves about 700 students a year in Central Texas, and a sister program in Houston that began last year serves about 120.

It runs about \$4,500 a year to cover expenses for a Capital IDEA student, said Angela Barraza, the organization's director of development and communications. The City of Austin and Travis County together cover about two-thirds of the group's \$3.1 million budget, with the balance paid by employers, philanthropic groups and other donors.

It's money well spent, according to an analysis by the Marshall Center.

Tax dollars allocated to Capital IDEA are recouped after 8 1/2 years, and the return to taxpayers totals 165 percent after 10 years, the analysis found. The return stems from a reduction in welfare and food stamp payments and an increase in tax revenue — the results of higher-paying jobs landed by graduates, whose average starting salary last year was \$18.82 an hour.

A study last year by the Aspen Institute, a policy and leadership organization, found that Capital IDEA students who earned degrees in nursing and other health care fields saw their annual earnings more than triple, rising from \$13,334 to \$44,100. On the other hand, only about 20 percent of students who initially sought a health care degree wound up earning one, the study said.

The classes can be challenging, especially prerequisites such as microbiology, medical terminology and pharmacology, and Capital IDEA is working to lift the completion rate, said Jackobs, adding, "There's a lot of work to do there."

For her part, Serna said the Capital IDEA program was life-changing, and she's delighted at the effect her experience had on her son: "To him, it's not a question of whether he's going to college, but which college and which degree."

John Ramirez of Lockhart, who earned a two-year degree in power technology from ACC with Capital IDEA's help, said his daughter's interest in higher education has intensified as well.

"She knows that without the job I have (at the Pedernales Electric Cooperative), we wouldn't have a lot of things we enjoy, and she knows I wouldn't have the job without my training," he said of Sarah, 14. "She wants to study law and be a federal judge."

A signature element of Capital IDEA is its College Prep Academy, jointly operated with ACC. The academy provides 12 weeks of intensive instruction and support to prepare students for college-level courses.

On average, 84 percent of entering college students who participate in the academy get up to speed on math — the subject with the highest number of unprepared students statewide — within two years. By contrast, 27 percent of community college students statewide meet the math standard in that period of time.

"They provide a service that allows many of our students to be much more successful than they would otherwise be," said Mike Midgley, ACC's vice president of instruction. "In a world with an infinite budget, I would be delighted to see the Capital IDEA model be expanded to all students. Obviously, you can't do that because of the cost."

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