

Student-Centered Tutoring Program Prepares D.C. Inmates for GED

By Michon H. Parker

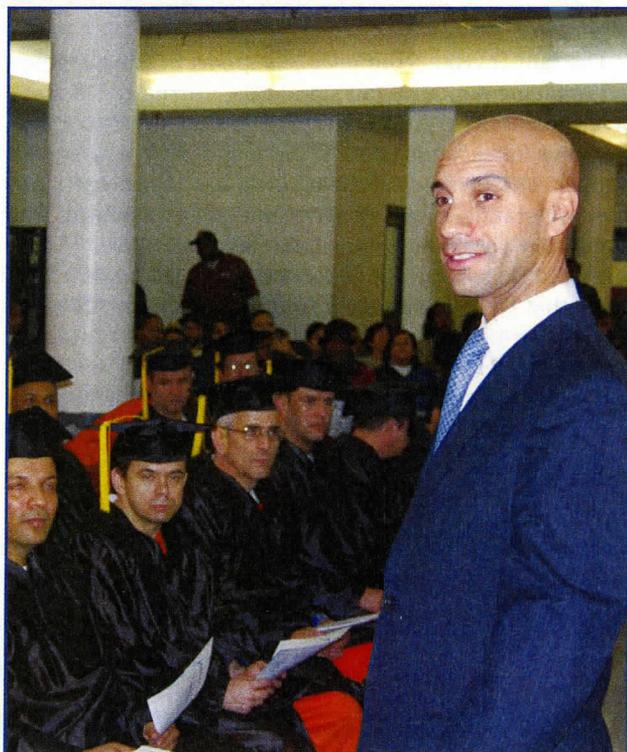
The Don't Forget Us (DFU) Peer Tutorship Program is designed to enhance academic success in the District of Columbia Department of Corrections' Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) programs. This inmate-led peer tutoring program, which is based on an "each one, teach one" learning model, provides inmates with the full range of necessary skills to complete and pass the GED test.

Jose Guterrez is a student in the DFU program. He entered the program more than a year ago with very limited English-speaking skills and expressed a personal goal of learning how to speak English fluently. He became a constant presence in the Spanish GED and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and demonstrated great progress. Subsequently, Guterrez took the GED in Spanish this past year. Furthermore, he has mastered the language so well that he now teaches ESL in the same program in which he learned English. "The DFU program is very important to everybody because it helps them learn and change their lives," Guterrez stated. His commitment to hard work typifies the dedication of DFU program participants.

DOC Director Devon Brown has been a long-time proponent of education programs for offender populations. In his view, "education is the key to enlightenment, a key that not only unlocks the door to knowledge but opens the gateway to personal and societal success." From this frame of reference, the DOC has set in place a plethora of education programs geared toward enhancing the lives of its jail inmates.

Program Background

Launched in the fall 2007, the DFU program has evolved into a huge success for all involved. The program now boasts two designated housing units within the Central Detention Facility (D.C. Jail) for those who are selected to participate in the program. The all-male units are comprised of detainees from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds with medium- and maximum-custody levels. (A similar educational program is being developed for the female inmate population.) Education program administrators agree that the physical placement of inmates in program-intensive units increases their chances of success.



Photos courtesy the District of Columbia DOC Educational Program Unit

Adrian M. Fenty, mayor of the District of Columbia, congratulates graduates, tutors and students at the GED completion ceremony.

The department's education team works tirelessly to ensure that program participants are equipped with the skills necessary to become successful test takers. The staff use assessment tools to evaluate tutor/student progress and to focus on the core components of curricula development, evaluation modules, teaching techniques and strategies. Course material in comprehension and retention is fostered through the student-centered model of collaborative learning, which takes place in the confines of the tutorship program. This model echoes the philosophical approach of many colleges and universities that utilize the student-centered paradigm.

Participant Selection

GED Program Coordinator Victor Akuchie sees tutors as the "life blood of the program." "They keep the program running effectively," he said. Tutors come from all

backgrounds and educational levels and are selected for a number of reasons:

- Display exemplary character traits: maturity, leadership and trustworthiness;
- Desire to teach others;
- Achievement of a GED credential or higher; and
- Completion of a rigorous testing phase (in which both academics and personality are assessed).

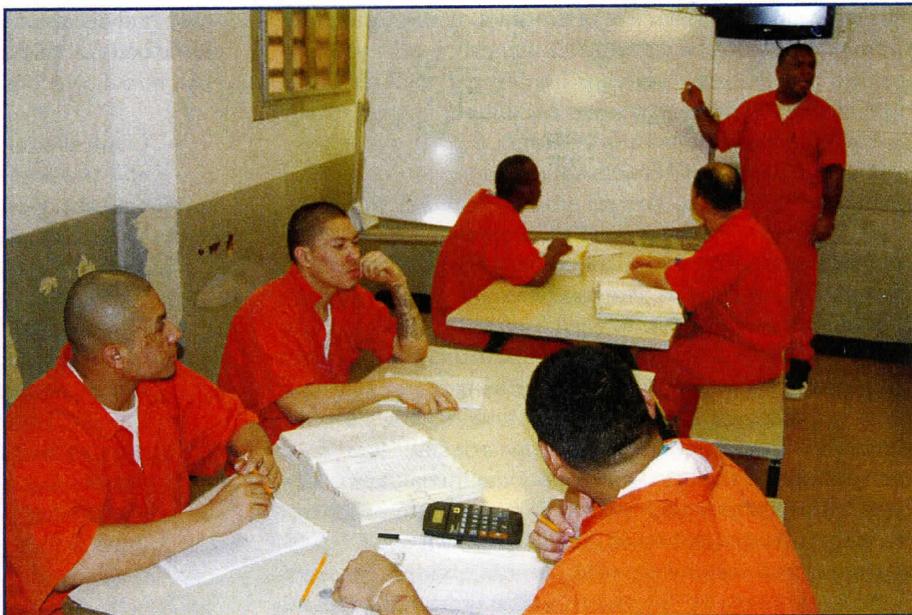
In order to remain in the GED program unit, participants must follow a strict code of conduct. At program start, all participants receive and sign a copy of the rules and regulations, acknowledging their compliance and full understanding that any infraction will result in immediate removal from the unit with no chance of reentry at a later date. All tutors volunteer, but must have a GED, high school diploma or have completed some college coursework. Tutors must also complete and pass the DOC tutor test examination prior to being assigned to teach a class. The program currently has 34 tutors, though this number fluctuates frequently due to inmate movement. The program includes both Spanish and English tutors who serve as program tutors throughout the duration of their sentence.

After successful completion of the assessment phase, tutors await final approval from the staff. If approved, they are transferred to the education unit. Tutors chosen are capable of teaching in all five academic disciplines of the GED exam — language arts writing, language arts reading, mathematics, social studies and science. Tutors are assigned based on their mastery of specific subject matter and their interest in a particular area. “Capitalizing on the tutor’s strengths helps foster enthusiasm,” Akuchie noted.

The DFU program is a comprehensive wrap-around program focusing on adult basic education curriculum, peer tutoring and performance accountability. Peer tutorship and mentoring has proved to be of monumental advantage to both mentor and mentee. Each tutor/mentor feels responsible for the potential success of his student mentee. Trust is a fundamental part of the mentor/mentee relationship and is crucial to making the tutorship experience work for both parties. “Both the inmate tutor and the inmate student feel as though they are equally benefiting or gaining by participating in the DFU program,” Akuchie said. The tutor strengthens his communication and interpersonal skills by functioning as a teacher while the student advances his understanding and capacity for learning.

“As a tutor, I like to teach, and it makes me feel good when I see the progress of every student, that way I know that I am doing something good and helping others,” Sergio Berrios, a Spanish tutor in the program, stated.

“It has shown me the possibilities that can be achieved when a few dedicated individuals come together and try to



Students engage as peer tutor Genoder Marmolego reviews the principles of positive and negative numbers in the program’s Pre-GED Gamma Spanish classes.

improve their lives. Because of this, I am a better tutor, for I strive to fulfill the promise of these possibilities,” tutor Jean Marc Arkele said.

Educational Program Administrator James Greene, Ed.D., attributes the success of this collaborative model in large part to the “leading by example approach.” Program participants spend hours with both Greene and Akuchie and see the hard work and dedication it takes to run a program like this inside a correctional facility. The inmates witness what true teamwork and collaboration entails by observing the cooperative behaviors of their program administrators.

Tutor Naibeye Koumbaria echoes Greene’s sentiment, “Being in this program has helped me be a better tutor because I can help individuals to get their GED. I am able to acquire knowledge, and I am viewed by students as a role model.”

The Process

The DFU program rotates students on a continual basis. New students arrive in the program every two weeks, at which point they are oriented to the rules, regulations and expectations. Once in the unit, an inmate undergoes one week of orientation, TABE (Test on Adult Basic Education) testing and placement testing. An inmate is then assigned to a class based on test outcomes. The only educational requirement is a desire to learn and follow the DOC educational program regimen. Program participants are able to enhance their academic skill set and very often choose to continue their educational pursuits. Thus, DOC has partnered with outside government and private institutions in which inmates can continue their academic studies upon release.

After orientation, students are given a placement test in each of the five academic disciplines. This placement test is specifically designed to identify each student’s academic strengths and weaknesses and is used to place them in the

academic category reflective of the amount of tutoring time needed to pass the GED exam:

- Alpha — GED ready;
- Beta — GED preparatory; and
- Gamma — pre-GED and ABE.

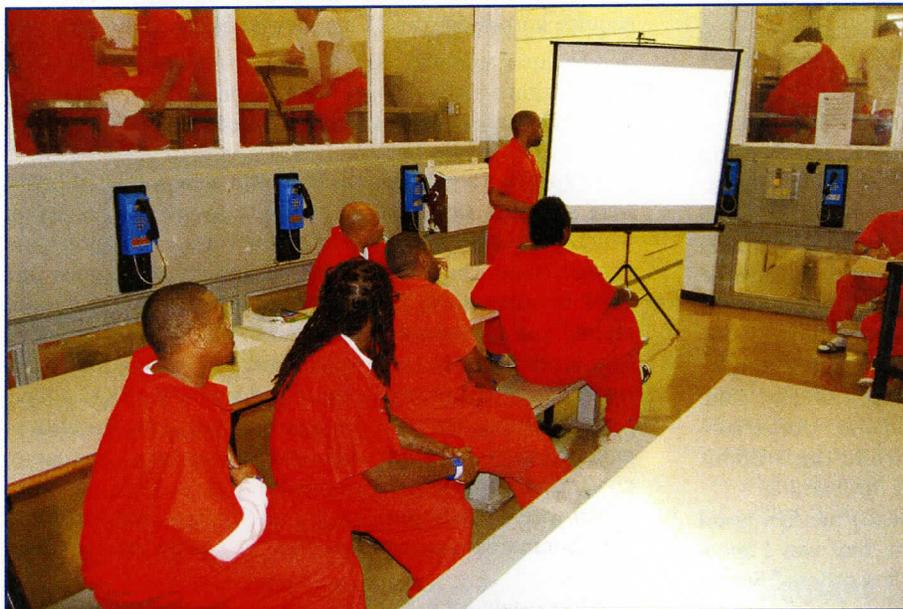
Tutors provide educational assistance to students during traditional instruction hours Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. They are also available to help students after class time, on weekends and at night, especially during GED preparatory periods. It is mandatory for both tutors and students to attend daily instruction sessions. Strict adherence to this teaching schedule allows for students and tutors to work efficiently in each subject area.

Additionally, DFU also offers optional humanities courses in the evenings from 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Humanities topics include language studies (English, Spanish and French), anger management, financial planning, small business building, continuing education, and fatherhood. Akuchie explained, "Although this segment of the program is optional, it is highly encouraged ... participants perform better based on this holistic approach to education — more than teaching to the test."

Participants continually comment on how the program has helped them become a better student/tutor. "I have more of a chance to utilize my time for learning and educating myself," Guterrez, the ESL tutor, said. "As a student we have time to concentrate and study. As a tutor, we learn more every day by teaching to the students, that way we get more improvement," Berrios, the Spanish tutor, stated.

Program Accountability

The DFU program has a built-in accountability component called the Tutor Organization. It provides a checks-and-balance approach to ensuring that tutors operate according to program rules and guidelines. This inmate-



Peer Tutor Jon Perry introduces the program's Alpha (GED-Ready) students to poetry in the Language Arts, Reading class.

only body is also able to provide direction to the collective tutor body. A select few are chosen to represent the executive board, which is comprised of:

- Chancellor — Serves as liaison between the program and the administrative staff of the institution. Oversees the overall operation of the program unit.
- Vice Chancellor — Assists the chancellor with duties and helps ensure that the program unit runs smoothly, especially in the absence of the chancellor.
- Dean of Students — Administers the placement test to newly enrolled students, maintains student-body rosters, and sees to all student-specific issues.
- Dean of Tutors — Administers the placement test to prospective tutors, assigns academic classes, and ensures that every class has a tutor present and that every tutor is following the academic schedule outlined in each syllabus.

Tutors on the executive board are voted on by their fellow tutors and approved by the program staff. "The members of the executive board have demonstrated that they have gained the confidence, support and respect from the students, tutors and staff and are considered leaders amongst equals," Akuchie noted. Executive board opportunities are available in both education units.

Math tutor Jermyl Moody serves as chancellor of one of the GED units. Moody describes the program's impact on him: "Being a tutor and chancellor allows me to be in constant contact with all the students. Although it allows me to teach them and stay fresh on my own skills, the most important benefit to me is being a mentor to these men. When it's all said and done, mentoring allows me to feel productive as a man."

The GED is offered four times a year (in February, May, August and November) and is administered by the University of the District of Columbia. Six weeks prior to the GED exam date, the Pre-GED test, supplied by the American

Council on Education, is given to program participants. Administering the Pre-GED test prior to the official GED exam allows program staff to evaluate the students' strengths and weaknesses and adequately prepare them for the final examination. In order to take the official GED examination, students must pass the Pre-GED test or submit supporting documentation that they have passed the Pre-GED at another institution.

Following a successful pass of the Pre-GED test, students then attend a GED Exam Preparatory Workshop offered daily by program staff for the six weeks leading up to the actual test. Workshop topics focus on test-taking skills and course-related material.

During the six-week review period, students engage in intense curricula-specific review sessions, with concentration in those areas in which they

have been identified as deficient, DFU tutors are present to assist in basic comprehension and retention of subject matter.

The Results

The importance of GED programming efforts is inherently visible in the increased numbers of national test takers. The numbers continue to rise as the economic woes in many regions reflect higher unemployment rates, which contribute to a more competitive and prepared work force. Thus, the need for GED credentials for inmates is even greater for those returning to the community aspiring to be productive citizens.

The American Council on Education reported in its 2008 GED Testing Program Statistical Report that nearly 777,000 adults worldwide took some portion of the battery of five GED tests measuring writing, reading, social studies, science and mathematics. Of those who completed the GED test battery in 2008, 73 percent passed. The report also noted that GED test completion and pass rates are affected by multiple factors, including candidates' levels of preparation and jurisdictional and testing center policies.

Educational programming efforts tailored to adult basic and general education development are prevalent in many penal institutions across the county. The adult inmate student is in essence a "captive audience," in that his or her physical confinement and strict lack of individual freedom imposes a regimen conducive to active learning. Consequently, statistics indicate that access and participation in GED programs in correctional institutions often lead to reduction of recidivism rates.

According to Director Brown, "The DFU program at the District of Columbia Department of Corrections, although still in its early stages, has yielded significant results since its inception." Program participants have maintained a 49 percent passage rate during the past year. Of 139 test takers, thus far 68 passed the GED examination on the first attempt. Comparatively, according to the 2008 GED statistical report by the American Council on Education, the pass rate for the District of Columbia for the same period is 64.4 percent.

Brown further emphasized, "Considering the low academic achievement of inmates prior to their incarceration and their strong adversity toward schooling during their tenure in the community, the success of the DFU program is quite impressive." The data demonstrate that targeted subject area remediation and preparation increase individuals' probability of better performance on the examination.

Program Benefits

Tutors receive financial compensation for their work in the program. Tutors also exit the program with DOC educational tutorship certificates authenticating their work as a peer tutor, which allows them to teach in other correctional institutions. Both students and tutors receive official verification letters validating program participation and educational progress, which they can present to court or a parole board. The courts have acknowledged the success of the program and entrusted the DOC with the responsibility

of furthering the inmates' education, thereby awarding participants with conditional release upon completion of the DFU Peer Tutorship Program. All tutors and students participate in graduation ceremonies that include the presentation of GED certificates. Tutors and students are greeted by a host of agency officials, and invited dignitaries including the mayor of the District of Columbia, who regularly attends the event.

There are multiple benefits associated with the DFU program structure. Benefits range from a better managed jail environment to cost-savings associated with the need for fewer conventional classrooms and civilian personnel.

Departmental data indicate a significant reduction in the number of infractions among those inmates housed in the GED unit. The average number of incidents per general population unit for the period of May 2008 through May 2009 was 20, compared with only seven incidents — less than half — for the GED unit. These findings clearly demonstrate that the reduction of inmate idleness leads to a more stable and secure facility.

Brown enthusiastically stated, "Placing ownership and accountability in the hands of the inmate population has proven to be extremely beneficial to the success of GED test takers at the department of corrections. Inmates join with one another in the process of educating themselves and enhancing opportunities for success beyond incarceration. Those inmates striving to reintegrate back into society will need the GED credential to become productive and participatory citizens."

The goal of the DFU tutorship program is to allow each participant to seize the opportunity to empower themselves by empowering one another — the aptly quoted "each one, teach one" slogan is commonly used among program participants. Thus, the success of the program is largely predicated on the strength of the student-centered learning educational model. Program administrators emphasize that the facilitative model requires full commitment and dedication on the part of the program participants. "In an environment where there are no state certified teachers to deliver curriculum, all the work is accomplished by using inmate tutors and program staff as facilitators," Greene said. Interestingly, what results is a collaborative, interactive teaching model among inmate tutors and inmates students who take ownership of, pride in and responsibility for their own learning processes.

Greene summarizes the nature of the symbiotic relationship between tutor and student saying that both parties can walk out of the program with a tangible measure of success. Greene further stresses the importance of the tutor/student relationship, "For the tutor, helping the student achieve a better understanding of course material is very rewarding. For the student, working with a peer who shares the same mindset and has already performed well on the GED test is both exemplary and motivational."

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