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## Allies in Education

A Profile of:

**Teen Opportunities Promote  
Success (TOPS) Program  
Birmingham, Alabama**

September 1987

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# Allies in Education

A Profile of:

## Teen Opportunities Promote Success (TOPS) Program Birmingham, Alabama

by Phyllis Snyder

September 1987

## THE SCHOOL/BUSINESS COLLABORATIONS STUDY

This profile of Teen Opportunities Promote Success (TOPS) is part of an assessment by Public/Private Ventures of partnerships between business and education. The three-year study was funded by The CIGNA Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Exxon Education Foundation, The IBM Corporation, The Pew Memorial Trust, and The Rockefeller Foundation. The assessment addressed three basic issues:

- o What is the nature of school/business collaborations? What achievements are expected?
- o What types of youth are served by these collaborative efforts?
- o What role does business play in the collaborations? How did business get involved? Why does it continue to be involved?

Public/Private Ventures has published Allies in Education: Schools and Businesses Working Together for At-Risk Youth, a two-year volume report these central questions. Profiles of nine different partnerships assessed as part of this project are included in the report's second volume.

### PUBLIC/PRIVATE VENTURES

Public/Private Ventures is a not-for-profit corporation that designs, manages and evaluates social policy initiatives designed to help disadvantaged people, especially youth, become productively employed and self-sufficient.

To achieve that goal, P/PV works with schools, government, employment and training organizations, community-based agencies, foundations and business in a variety of ways:

- o We design new strategies to remedy such pressing problems as the high dropout rate, illiteracy and youth unemployment.
- o We evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to confront these problems.
- o We conduct multisite national demonstrations to rigorously test promising new solutions.
- o We help the public and private sectors replicate initiatives that have proven effective.

From all our work, we distill the best practices and most significant research findings, and actively promote their use in the development of sound public policy.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Teen Opportunities Promote Success (TOPS) is a project operated by the Birmingham Area Alliance of Business (BAAB) for economically disadvantaged high school seniors. It offers a combination of paid employment and life skills classes designed to prepare youth to obtain a job or to seek additional education or training after high school. The program operates year round and includes a six-week Preparatory Training Program (PTP) during the spring, which is mandatory for all high school juniors accepted into the program. Participants work during the summer or the school year and attend special classes that teach them career awareness, job search skills and appropriate work behavior.

TOPS, which has been in existence since 1981, is a Partnership Project, one of the first replications of the New Horizons program in Richmond, Virginia. The target population is students who have completed the junior year of high school, have been present at school a minimum of 80 percent of the time and have maintained at least a "C" average. At least 80 percent of TOPS enrollees must meet the income eligibility requirements of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). The number of students participating in the summer program has almost tripled from 40 the first year to 112 in the fourth year; the school-year component has doubled from 20 students the first year to 44 in the fourth year.

Funding for the program comes primarily from the Birmingham Private Industry Council, the lead JTPA agency in the city. Contributions from private sector firms in the city currently cover about 20 percent of the budget. TOPS and New Horizons are both viewed as cornerstones of the national network of Partnership Projects, a group of school/business partnerships organized with initial funding from The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and technical assistance from Martin & Rosi of Richmond.

TOPS is an alternative work/study program serving disadvantaged youth in the year prior to their entry into the labor force or higher education. Its key features include the following:

- o It serves economically disadvantaged high school seniors, many of whom have never worked before.
- o It has a separate summer and year-round program, thereby serving a larger number of youth than it could with a single cohort. The summer program includes 12 hours of classes and 16 to 20 hours of work during an eight-week period. During the school year, students attend TOPS classes one evening a week for three hours during a 28-week period and work for approximately 15 hours a week.

- o It places youth in paid jobs in a variety of settings, including a large number of small and medium-sized businesses, using Targeted Jobs Tax Credits (TJTC) as an incentive for businesses to employ youth.
- o It is operated by a nonprofit business organization headed by an experienced director, staffed by three professionals and a secretary and organized specifically to run TOPS.
- o It has successfully tapped the talents and services of the board, primarily the members of the executive committee, to assist in job development, fundraising and budget preparation, and increasing the range of the program's contacts and its visibility in the business community.
- o It operates its educational component separately from the school district but hires Birmingham public school teachers to deliver the curriculum and works with guidance counselors at each of the 13 high schools to assist in recruitment of students.
- o It took an established partnership model and successfully adapted it to the specific needs of the Birmingham community.

This profile describes the program's goals, origins, context, structure, key features and outcomes. Particular attention is given to the factors that led to success. Information for this profile was gathered during a total of five days of both focused and unstructured interviews, observations and review of documentary materials. A three-day visit was made by two people during the summer of 1985, and a two-day visit by one person during December of 1985.

## II. CONTEXT AND HISTORY

### ENVIRONMENT

During the late 1970s, Birmingham's schools experienced the substantial population loss characteristic of many large urban school districts. However, the needs of students who remained in the schools were increasing and little was being done to help them make the transition to the world of work. Youth unemployment in Birmingham was high, 5 to 8 percent above the national average, and CETA programs had done little to solve the problem.

In 1980, Ruby Martin came to Birmingham to promote replication of the recently developed business/school partnership that she had helped to launch in Richmond. Martin found a receptive audience in a business community that had begun to recognize the need to take a more active role in addressing the economic and educational needs of the community's youth. Many of the business leaders who listened to Martin had been active in the local chapter of the National Alliance of Business (NAB), which at that time lacked strong, effective programs. Since the youth program outlined by Martin required a locally incorporated body, the key actors involved in NAB reconstituted themselves into the Birmingham Area Alliance of Business (BAAB), whose sole mission was to oversee the development of what became TOPS. BAAB was established to "furnish organizational and operations management and program direction for projects to develop training and employment opportunities in the private sector for economically disadvantaged and marginally skilled persons."

### GOALS

Those who listened and responded to the need for a new employment program for youth in Birmingham shared similar goals. Faced by a 25 percent youth unemployment rate, both business people and school personnel welcomed a program that would take youth who were unable to "make it" on their own after graduation and give them the experience and the confidence to obtain a job or seek further training. Equally important to the program's originators was the possibility of gaining access to corporate environments that would normally be closed to the primarily black, economically disadvantaged youth who comprised the program's population, and to demonstrate to the youth that they could succeed in finding and retaining jobs there.

For businesses, the program represented a means to achieve several goals at once. They could use their human resources and contribute to the community in a visible way with the hope of some short-term gains in the form of trained workers, and long-term gains in the form of improved image and environment for



both the school district and the city. For the school district, involvement in a program of this type promised an opportunity to better serve many of the students who did not qualify for existing cooperative education programs as well as to strengthen their ties to the business community. More than half of Birmingham's students are enrolled in vocational education programs, but only a small percentage actually have the opportunity to combine their training with work experience while in school.

For both sectors, this program represented an opportunity to work together through a neutral and businesslike organization which, by serving disadvantaged youth, would ultimately meet the goal of improving Birmingham. A program that combined work experience with classes specifically focused on employability training had the potential to permit both the business and educational communities to address current problems and to benefit equally from the solution.

#### BUSINESS ROLE IN PROGRAM START-UP

From the beginning, TOPS was organized and implemented from a business perspective. Leadership in the effort to form BAAB and hire operating staff was taken by the presidents of two of Birmingham's largest employers, Vulcan Materials and the Liberty National Life Insurance Company. BAAB was set up with a board of directors composed almost entirely of business people who sought to ensure that the difficulties business had experienced with school or government bureaucracies in prior employment programs would not be repeated.

Participation from business was at the level of CEO has entailed continuing responsibilities to TOPS. Resources of the board president's firm--such as printing, financial advice, and other forms of technical assistance--have come to be regarded as part of a president's commitment. In launching the TOPS program and placing it solely under the direction of the BAAB board, business attempted to ensure that it would retain control over the management and operation of the program, despite the fact that the bulk of funding comes from the Private Industry Council. Although daily management is handled by the director and her staff, board members are expected to play an active role in specific tasks during the year.

#### SCHOOL ROLE IN PROGRAM START-UP

Although the schools participated in planning and implementing the program, they play a subsidiary role. BAAB has made a distinct effort to operate autonomously, entirely separate from both the PIC and the school district.

At the time the TOPS program was being planned, the school district was continuing to lose students--some to surrounding districts, some to private schools--and the percentage of black students in the system had risen to 85 percent. Over half of all high school students were enrolled in vocational classes, but fewer than half of those students were able to obtain jobs through the cooperative education program. Also, the schools' access to Birmingham's largest corporations had been limited. Therefore, from the schools' perspective, the program that BAAB was proposing to implement could be seen as complementing and enlarging their ability to serve students who had managed to remain in school until their junior year, but who were ill-prepared either to work or to continue training or education after graduation.

The school district was represented in the planning process by Dr. Dorothy Chambers, currently the head of vocational programs. The superintendent of schools is a member of the board of BAAB.

### III. PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND ROLES

Primary responsibility for operating TOPS and for coordinating the involvement of both schools and business rests with the staff of BAAB, which consists of an executive director, two other professionals and a secretary. Other key organizations involved in operations include the Birmingham School District and the businesses providing jobs for the students. These roles are described more fully below.

#### BAAB

The executive director, Marsha Ham, reports to a business board composed of 28 members. Although most board members are not involved in daily decisions about the operation of the program, the board plays a significant role through the provision of money, guidance and in-kind services. Efforts to raise funds and recruit new businesses are dependent on the board's contacts and loaned personnel. According to the director, the president and the five officers of BAAB who constitute the executive committee have most consistently provided necessary resources, in some cases meeting with her several times a week.

#### TOPS STAFF

Marsha Ham, who has been executive director since the program's founding, provides continuity and credibility to the program in both the educational and business communities. Her background as a vocational education teacher has provided her with knowledge of and entry into the Birmingham school system. She has worked well with her board, enlisting them in program expansion, and has taken advantage of the management training that members of the board have provided.

The other two professionals are newer to BAAB. Nina Lockard, training and public relations specialist, joined the organization in the spring of 1984, and is responsible for coordinating the recruitment of new businesses, organizing the Preparatory Training Program (PTP) sessions and producing the newsletter. She does some training of teaching staff and serves as a liaison between employers and the program. Her background is in marketing and public relations for the hotel industry, and she has worked to strengthen the business emphasis in some aspects of the classes, particularly PTP. Susan Raffield, program coordinator, joined the program in the fall of 1985, after teaching in the summer classes. She had also had extensive contact with the program in her prior role as a guidance counselor in one of Birmingham's high schools, where she had been involved in recruitment for TOPS. Her understanding of the weaknesses of the

recruitment process within the schools and the need to publicize the program better should help to target her efforts. TOPS staff is responsible for completing the forms necessary for a firm to receive credit for TJTC, if the student whom the business hires is qualified.

#### SCHOOL DISTRICT

Key program actors from the Birmingham school district include guidance counselors, who coordinate the recruitment effort in individual schools. They are asked to notify potential participants when a presentation is to be made at a high school by BAAB staff. They supply applications to interested students, monitor their completion and return, and check the form certifying financial eligibility.

The school district also supplies teachers for the program; they are recruited by Marsha Ham based on recommendations by department heads. Since they receive separate salaries from BAAB for teaching, their relationship to TOPS is different from that of the guidance counselors. In addition to their classroom responsibilities, teachers also monitor students at work and handle questions or problems that arise. Several have taught since the first year, and seem to relish the small classes, the opportunity to teach as part of a team and the opportunity to work collaboratively both with fellow teachers and with business people.

#### BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Birmingham businesses supply the jobs for TOPS students and the supervisors to instruct and monitor those hired. The majority of the businesses hire one or two students only; during the summer of 1985, only six of the 74 businesses that hired TOPS students hired more than three. Primary hiring is done by big business, and TOPS promotion emphasizes the availability of the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit program.

Business is also enlisted to help recruit new business collaborators through the Loaned Executive Program. Thus far, representation has been primarily from large businesses also involved in other forms of community service. Birmingham has no other large-scale youth employment effort that solicits jobs from the private sector. Cooperative education programs run by the school district target a different group of firms and have never placed students in the banks, insurance companies and large manufacturing firms that have hired TOPS students.

#### IV. KEY PROGRAM FEATURES

Although the TOPS program admits all participants in the spring of their junior year of high school, it serves them in two separate sequences during the summer and school year. The classes and work experience components in each sequence remain the same but, during the school-year program, they are spread over a longer period of time. According to the program's administrators, the two-tiered arrangement allows a greater number of youth to be served and draws upon a wider array of businesses, since it allows businesses to hire extra, temporary help during the period of greatest need. This section will describe the components of the program for both the summer and school-year programs, and the differences among them.

The primary components of the TOPS program are as follows:

- o Preparatory Training Program (PTP)
- o Job Fair
- o Work Experience
- o Classes

##### PREPARATORY TRAINING PROGRAM (PTP)

The PTP program was developed to address a weakness in the program structure identified during the first two program cycles. Prior to inclusion of PTP, the students began the TOPS program cycle with the Jobs Fair in May, when employers interviewed those students who had been admitted to the program and decided whom they wished to hire. Although students were given some preparation prior to the Job Fair, it became obvious to the program staff that most of the youth had no idea how to conduct themselves in interviews. Consequently, it was difficult for the business interviewers to gain a fair assessment of the youths' ability to fill the jobs.

The PTP program was introduced in the spring of 1984 for the first time, and included classes on interviewing, resume preparation and career planning; they were taught primarily by several teachers who also taught regular TOPS classes. Some teaching was also done by Nina Lockard, who is responsible for the Job Fair and the Loaned Executive program. She attempted to introduce a business perspective into skills preparation and to strengthen the link between the content of the classes and the requirements of the working world.

Students may cover some of the topics addressed by the PTP classes in high school, particularly if they take vocational classes. The entire school system has begun to move in the direction of earlier career preparation for students. However,

the PTP classes seem to convey the information more effectively. According to the program's managers, there are several possible reasons:

- o The classes are conducted at the campus of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where the students are taken by bus after school. The campus location serves to heighten the importance of the instruction.
- o The classes are followed quickly by the Job Fair, where instruction can be put to the test in real interviews.
- o Class size is small, affording several benefits: students begin to know both the instructors and their classmates more intensively, students receive some special attention and staff can evaluate students and recommend them for appropriate private job interviews based on their abilities and interests.

#### JOB FAIR

The next step after students have completed PTP classes is the Job Fair. Held in late spring, the Job Fair brings together both existing employers and those who have been newly enlisted as part of the recruitment campaign staffed by loaned executives. TOPS staff select several students to interview for each available position; by bringing all the students and employers together, all interviewing can be accomplished on the same day. Employers rank youth interviewed and staff attempt to match their preferences as much as possible. Participants must compete for jobs as they would in a normal job-hunting situation.

Usually the students with the best records and presence at interviews are hired for summer jobs; the remaining youth are told they will be contacted in the early fall about jobs that will be available during the school year. The pattern in past years has been for roughly twice as many students to participate in the summer program as participate during the school year. More employers are willing to hire students during the summer when they are able to work more hours per day; many students prefer the summer program because they want to work during the summer and may find the combination of after-school work and an evening class too difficult during the school year. During the past two program years, the number of participants in each part has been as follows:

#### In 1983-84

- o 191 students began PTP

- o 173 students completed PTP
- o 112 students were hired for summer jobs  
(96 completed)
- o 54 students were hired for school-year jobs  
(48 completed)

In 1984-85

- o 202 students began PTP
- o 171 students completed PTP
- o 106 students were hired for summer jobs  
(101 completed)
- o 63 students were hired for school-year jobs  
(50 completed).

Since so much time elapses between the Job Fair in late spring and the school-year program, a few students are lost to the program in the intervening months. However, the format of the Fair has proven efficient and has served to focus attention on the program and the number of youth and businesses that participate.

ACADEMIC COMPONENT

During both the summer and school-year programs, students attend classes and work. Although a Birmingham public school, the Glen Iris Community School, houses the classes, and the teachers are hired from the school system, the classes are kept separate from high school in other ways. For most students, the class content is new, though some material may be covered in vocational classes. Students attend classes four mornings a week from 9 a.m. to noon during the summer, and one evening a week from 6 to 9 p.m. during the school year. Generally, the classes have between 20 and 25 students, and are taught by a team of two teachers who remain together during the entire program.

The curriculum emphasizes developing several types of skills:

- o Employability skills, such as using standard English, that will assist youth to function better at the work place;
- o Life skills, such as maintaining a checkbook and paying taxes, that will allow them to manage other aspects of their lives; and,
- o Job-search skills, such as preparing a resume, that will prepare them to find a job on their own after high school.

The curriculum was originally developed for the program by a consultant from the University of Alabama, but it has been modified to address students' weaknesses by the teachers, many of whom have taught for several summers.

The introduction of a competency-based payment system by the Private Industry Council during the 1985 fiscal year required enumeration of each competency and specification of the methods of assessment. The teachers test students' mastery of specific tasks within each competency area and maintain records that are submitted to the PIC before a participant can be paid. In the future, admission to the program will depend on verification of an applicant's lack of competency in similar areas. TOPS staff have begun to use a checklist that allows them to check youths' weaknesses and thereby demonstrate their need for the program.

The classes have not been enthusiastically received by youth in prior years, despite a careful choice of teachers and curricular materials. Several steps have been taken to vary the pattern of the classes and to heighten students' interest. During the summer of 1985, more outside speakers were brought in; trips were scheduled to businesses during the school day and to plays in the evening. Speakers, some from businesses employing students, were chosen to present topics that emphasize the connection between the classroom and the outside world. One presentation addressed the appropriate use of standard English versus black English in the work setting. At the end of the summer, student ratings of classes were more enthusiastic; participants welcomed the variety.

Another change that has been made in the classroom portion of the program is to include regular counseling. Counseling was introduced into the program because of the number of problems that participating students faced both in their personal lives and at work. Although the relationship that develops between students and teachers is frequently strong, the teachers felt unsure of their ability to handle some student problems. Counselors meet weekly with each class; there is always a prepared topic for discussion as well as time for students to raise questions or problems of their own. Counselors also meet with teachers during staff meetings to discuss students' problems.

In both segments of the program, summer and year-round, strict attendance is required and students are not permitted to work if they do not attend classes. During the school year, participants are allowed no more than four absences; during the summer, three. Classes are conducted in the same public school during the school year as during the summer. According to one staff member, locating the school in a poor black neighborhood has been an obstacle to recruiting white students. In addition, the school is not centrally located nor accessible to public transportation, and most of the students appear to be dependent on having someone



drive them to classes. This poses a particularly serious problem for school-year participants. They work for three hours after school and then must attend evening classes and complete their homework.

## WORK COMPONENT

### Nature of Jobs

It is the opportunity to gain work experience that attracts most students to the TOPS program; and it is the nature of the work experience that distinguishes TOPS from other types of job opportunities available to students of this age. According to the program's administrators, the atmosphere and environment of the jobs are as important as the jobs themselves. The TOPS experience is seen as a means "to gain entry into corporate America" for disadvantaged, primarily black youth whose opportunities for part-time employment would otherwise be limited to jobs in fast-food restaurants. Of the 10 largest employers in Birmingham in 1985, half employed TOPS students.

Since the students bring few skills to their jobs and are able to work only on a part-time basis, the jobs they can fill at large corporations are necessarily limited. Many positions require some secretarial skills and involve typing, filing, answering the telephone and, perhaps, some data entry on a computer. There are also a number of janitorial positions, demanding both strength and a willingness to perform physical labor, that have been traditionally assigned to the males, who represent about 40 percent of the program's participants. Such sex stereotyping weakens the program since it reinforces the youths' preconceived notions about appropriate jobs for men and women; and it limits recruitment because the predominance of secretarial positions encourages more women than men to apply.

### Role of Supervisors

Often one person in a company takes responsibility for coordinating hiring and supervision of students, choosing supervisors and serving as a contact for problems or questions. In some companies, the actual supervisors attend the Job Fair and hire the students whom they will supervise. BAAB staff provide a one-hour orientation for supervisors at the beginning of the work period; the supervisors are then visited regularly by the teachers as part of their monitoring responsibilities. Supervisors also receive printed information listing the rules and regulations of the program and requirements for students; they must sign a letter of agreement acknowledging their responsibilities and also the students' rights under the program. They are informed of the program's strict attendance policy: if a student is dismissed from either work or classes, that action results in dismissal

from the entire program. Most of the supervisors interviewed said they enjoyed the opportunity to train and monitor students in the business environment and often continued to participate year after year. They frequently expressed pleasure at the short time it took to turn the student into a productive worker. None seemed to gain formal recognition from their superiors for their participation. In many of the companies where P/PV researchers interviewed staff or observed youth at work, it appeared that supervisors trained and treated participants in large part like regular employees.

### Recruitment of Business

When the TOPS program began, the leadership of BAAB took responsibility for locating a sufficient number of jobs for program participants. Since most of the board members came from big businesses within the city, the initial sources of employment were insurance companies, banks, the university and the medical center. Although such organizations continued to accept equal numbers of youth in subsequent years, they were generally unable to expand the number of slots. Also, because summer and school-year employment was needed, wider recruitment became necessary. General solicitations by TOPS yielded little. It became clear that a successful recruitment effort would have to build on the contacts and prestige of the board and be viewed as a "business to business" request. The TOPS staff, therefore, organized a six-week "Loaned Executive" recruitment campaign during the spring of 1983.

The campaign has continued to be an annual part of the program. Birmingham businesses contribute the time, generally of a middle-management executive, to call other businesses in the city and urge them to offer jobs to TOPS students. The executives are trained by the TOPS staff, provided with numerous materials, and urged to compete among themselves to obtain the most job commitments. The effort has succeeded in increasing the pool of jobs from 20 the first summer to 106 during the summer of 1985. However, recruitment remains slow. Positive recognition from TOPS employers has not resulted in requests for students from additional businesses.

Expansion of the program and the need to find more jobs will likely mean that greater effort will be placed on reaching the small and mid-size firms that have so far not fully participated in the program. Despite the costs to smaller businesses of training and absorbing the students, TOPS has attempted to recruit smaller businesses. They not only expand the source of jobs but also frequently offer youth more varied opportunities. There may be less formal training, but chances to learn on the job are often greater.

## V. NATURE OF YOUTH

This section describes the youth TOPS targets, the process by which they are recruited, and the youth it actually serves.

### Target Population

In defining the target population for the TOPS program, program planners adopted the criteria used in Richmond. They defined the target population as students who had maintained a "C" average in high school, had strong attendance records and were JTPA-eligible, but who lacked the skills and experience to obtain a job after graduation.

Some of the requirements were dictated by the nature of the program. Since the job is such an important aspect of TOPS, the program's administrators wanted students who were not in danger of failing and, therefore, of dropping out of the program, and students who could be counted on to show up regularly. By requiring JTPA eligibility, the program became eligible for funding from the Private Industry Council to cover operating expenses. Unlike the New Horizons program in Richmond, TOPS has not required JTPA eligibility from all youth, and has generally set the limit between 75 and 80 percent of participants. In part, staff has used the JTPA "window," which allows a percentage of the participants to exceed the income limits, and, in part, they have sought funding from participating corporations to allow greater flexibility. Another difference between the TOPS and Richmond models is that TOPS accepts students who are juniors rather than sophomores since the program is for one year only.

### Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment has proven to be a far more difficult problem in Birmingham than in Richmond. This is primarily due to the number of schools where recruiting can take place. Birmingham has 13 high schools, all of which can supply students to the program. TOPS staff go to each of the schools to make presentations to the juniors, but because of the number of sites and their other job responsibilities, staff must rely on guidance counselors to alert students to the existence of the program and to do most of the follow-up, such as ensuring that students complete and submit applications. Guidance counselors generally have a wide range of competing responsibilities and program recruitment is often low on their list of priorities. BAAB's conscious and determined effort to operate TOPS as a business organization separate from the school district means that its influence and importance within the schools is lessened. However, since TOPS teachers are drawn from the city's high schools, they often bolster the recruitment effort in their own schools by increasing students' awareness of the program.

The standard recruitment presentation deliberately avoids any mention of economic disadvantage as a requirement; TOPS is not portrayed as a poverty effort and seeks to interest a broad mix of students. Income screening is not done until students have submitted their applications. According to the staff, the need to verify family income is one factor that has limited the number of white students who apply. White families reportedly object strongly to the questions about income.

The school presentation emphasizes the type of jobs that students can obtain through the program, since it is difficult for Birmingham youth to find jobs on their own. Despite its good placement record and national recognition, the TOPS program is still not well-known in the city; one of the tasks facing Susan Raffield in improving the recruitment process is to convince her contacts within high school guidance departments to publicize the program to their students. Only half the students who enroll in vocational classes in Birmingham's schools are able to obtain jobs; they should be a ready pool of applicants for the job opportunities offered through TOPS.

#### Characteristics of Youth

Of the students who enter the program, approximately 60 percent are female and, in the spring of 1985, 100 percent were black. In prior years, white participants had comprised between three and five percent. Currently, the percentage of Birmingham's population that is black is 55 percent; the percentage among school students is 85 percent. In addition to the income screening referred to above, the program's difficulty in attracting white students in at least the proportion they represent of the total school population may result from the greater number of job opportunities available to white students in Birmingham without the program's assistance. Also, according to several staff members and teachers, the location of the Glen Iris Community School where TOPS classes are held during both the summer and school-year portion of the program is considered dangerous; white parents hesitate to send their children there, particularly in the evening. A final factor may be that recruitment is done by word of mouth; students who have been in the program recommend it to their friends or siblings and, therefore, tend to perpetuate the major characteristics of prior years. A noticeable difference exists between students who are hired for the summer and school-year programs. The popularity of summer jobs is generally greater, and employers are usually able to obtain their first choice among the students. Thus, while economically disadvantaged (i.e., JTPA-eligible), those students hired in the summer are usually the more educationally advantaged of the eligible applicants.

Students interviewed by P/PV staff during the summer program were more articulate and more thoughtful about their future goals than were the youth interviewed during the school year. Of the 15 students questioned during the summer, approximately one-third planned to continue their education after high school; several expressed specific career goals. Due to the difficulty of obtaining summer jobs in Birmingham, students in academic courses may view the program as a source for good summer jobs. Since they are likely to present themselves well, their chances of being hired during the summer are strong. Although this policy may limit TOPS' ability to serve those youth who are most in need of what the program offers, many of the students in academic courses are also economically disadvantaged and, despite their professed desire to continue their education after high school, may need to combine work with postsecondary schooling and will derive benefit from the TOPS job experience.

## VI. COSTS

The bulk of funding for the operation of BAAB comes from the Private Industry Council, the primary recipient of JTPA funding in Birmingham. In 1985-86, the \$225,000 that BAAB received from the PIC constituted 82 percent of its budget. The remainder of the \$275,760 budget was met by \$50,000 in corporate donations from Birmingham businesses and \$760 in interest income. Student wages are paid by the firms; if students are eligible for the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit, the BAAB office will assist the hiring firm in taking advantage of the credit. In past years, one of the largest TOPS employers, Vulcan Materials, had also contributed funds to pay the wages of students employed by nonprofit organizations. According to budget calculations prepared by program staff, cost-per-participant for the 1985-86 program year was \$658, one hundred dollars less than for the prior program year.

Business also assumes another cost of hiring a TOPS student: the loss of employee time to train and supervise youth. Although this may be recouped in part by the productivity of students' labor once the training has been completed, the small number of students hired by smaller businesses likely attests to the costs that training imposes. It may also reflect the fact that participants work only part time and may be difficult to integrate into the work force. However, supervisors at several businesses observed that, in some respects, the "costs" of a TOPS employee were less than those of other new entry-level employees. The youth had been prescreened and arrived with both positive attitudes and a work ethic that were reinforced by classes they attended while working.

BAAB's total budget in 1985-86 increased \$25,000 over the previous year, an 11 percent increase; the proportion of funding from JTPA also increased from 72 percent to 82 percent. However, according to Marsha Ham, one of BAAB's current priorities is to increase funding from other sources; she spent a great deal of time during the fall of 1985 learning the techniques of corporate solicitation from some of her board members, and she has begun to apply them. The current performance-based contract poses payment problems for the program when youth are dropped due to poor attendance or other problems. Reducing BAAB's reliance on PIC funding would increase its flexibility and ability to launch additional programs.

## VII. OUTCOMES

Benefits from TOPS have accrued to youth, businesses, schools and teachers, though not in equal measure. The goal of the program is to assist disadvantaged youth; youth are the primary beneficiaries. The BAAB staff recently surveyed youth who had participated in the program from the summer of 1981 through the 1984/85 school year. Of the 425 questionnaires that were mailed, 168 responses (40 percent) were obtained through a combination of mail and telephone solicitation. The responses were as follows:

- o 42 percent were attending four-year colleges;
- o 17 percent were attending two-year colleges; and
- o 7 percent were attending vocational schools.

A combined total of 66 percent were continuing their education or training. Of those 110 still attending school, 40 percent were working full or part time, 10 percent of them still in their TOPS job. Of the remaining 58 respondents, 16 (28 percent) were unemployed.

Although it seems likely that former participants who had something positive to report might be more likely to respond to the survey, the number of TOPS graduates working and/or attending school is impressive in a city where the unemployment rate for 1985 was 9.7 percent. The comments that accompanied the surveys emphasize how the program influenced the participants' lives. According to one respondent, "The program provided many benefits, but the two main benefits were job experience and confidence in myself." Another reported that he held a job in the company in which he had been placed by TOPS, and that he had been promoted.

Teachers in the schools comment that TOPS students behave differently from other comparable students, and refer to characteristics such as their increased self-confidence and sense of direction. For many of these students, TOPS provides an opportunity to achieve success and gain satisfaction, something many have never been able to do in school. The majority of youth in the program have no special accomplishments in their backgrounds, and qualify for a program like TOPS because they don't stand out.

When students who participated in the 1985 summer portion of the program were asked to evaluate all aspects of the program at the conclusion of the summer, it was often the personal interest in them and their plans that impressed the participants. According to one of the students, the instructors were "Excellent...Showed interest in what we was (sic) doing." Others referred to the "good advice" and the "help in setting goals." In response to the question of whether or not they would recommend the program to a friend, a student wrote that he would because, "Where I come

from, just about all of them needs (sic) help to make it in the real work world and how to get along with other people."

Mentoring is not specifically built into the program, but the ratio of teachers to students and the sustained contact with both teachers and supervisors during their participation in the program provides students with a similar opportunity. For many students, the extra attention from a concerned adult may be the single most important component. Several people are always actively concerned about the participants' grades, absences, problems and work experiences. This support is further bolstered by the peer group support that develops out of this experience.

### Business Outcomes

A number of businesses that do not normally hire students directly out of high school have accepted students from TOPS. No systematic attempt has been made to measure if this has opened additional jobs to graduates of the Birmingham schools, or to determine the number of TOPS students who have remained as permanent employees. Based on the graduate survey, 32 of the 168 (19 percent) people who responded were still working at their original TOPS job.

TOPS has continued to be viewed by business as an attractive program with which to collaborate. It allows individual businesses to choose students whom they wish to hire. It provides TJTC credit for hiring many of the youth, and it helps companies meet affirmative action quotas. In accepting TOPS students, a business can proceed with confidence, perhaps even more than when hiring regular employees. Not only are the students trained in job-appropriate behavior before beginning work, but they continue to receive guidance during the time they are on the job. Should a problem arise, the supervisor knows whom to contact to resolve any difficulties.

Although there are a number of other youth employment programs that offer similar job opportunities and allow students to enter large corporations on the ground floor, TOPS is structured in such a way as to ensure that business continues to see it as their program. Robert Stewart, Chairman of the Board of Liberty National Life Insurance Company and an early board member of BAAB, described the program in the following way: "The only jobs that should be created are in the private sector. I want to emphasize that our program is not a government program. It is a private program."

Participation in BAAB has also become an acceptable outlet for businesses in Birmingham that are interested in increasing their community involvement and visibility. Unlike other forms that this civic contribution might take, hiring TOPS students means



that youth benefit directly while business is able to contribute on its own terms.

#### Outcomes for Schools and Teachers

TOPS' involvement with the schools has been minimal, and the separate status has been carefully maintained by the program's administrators. However, teachers are drawn from the school district. They report that the opportunity to teach with a partner in small classes has been both enjoyable and beneficial. TOPS also benefits the schools by enabling students in vocational education to find employment while still in school.

### VIII. PROGRAM STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL/BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

TOPS is an efficient, generally well-run program that attempts to prepare youth for work in business environments that might otherwise be closed to them. TOPS aims to teach youth skills that will assist them in obtaining employment during the rest of their lives. Among its strengths are the following:

- o The program effectively bridges the gap between schools and business through the efforts and experience of key staff members, the use of "loaned executives" to recruit new businesses, and the care with which jobs are selected.
- o The educational component has been modified each year both to address the concerns of business and the interest of students.
- o Teachers and supervisors who work directly with the students are concerned and committed.

However, there are a number of areas that require attention. Many of them are already being addressed by the staff; however, they bear mentioning because they augment our understanding of TOPS' operation and are typical of problems facing similar partnership efforts. Among these problem areas are the following:

- o In order to continue to grow, TOPS has to increase the job commitment of existing companies or find ways to enlist new companies in the hiring efforts. The majority of Birmingham's large corporations are already participating; the challenge will be to reach the small and medium-sized companies who are less likely to belong to the Chamber of Commerce or to be part of the business establishment.
- o The student recruitment process is weak; information about the program may not be reaching those students who could benefit most. Possible solutions may be to increase incentives for guidance counselors or to send more TOPS staff into the schools.
- o Effort must be placed on attracting participants who reflect the racial mix of the entire school population in Birmingham. The current all-black program is not beneficial to the students or to the program's reputation within the community.
- o Many of the current jobs are sexually stereotyped and serve to perpetuate the imbalance between males and

females in the program. Both employers and students should be encouraged to broaden their perspectives.

- o The timing and location of school-year classes pose a problem for many participants, who come directly from a day at school followed by three hours of work. The administrators' conviction that it would be difficult to integrate such classes into the school day leaves few alternatives, but the present arrangement is unsatisfactory.

The TOPS program's continued growth and development depends on its relationship to both business and the schools. The program has provided some portion of the Birmingham business community with the opportunity to assist the city's youth through an employment program that has yielded benefits for them as well as for the youth. Whether those benefits will serve to enlist other businesses remains the next test for the program. The ability of TOPS to grow and to serve those students most in need may be limited by its ability to strengthen its linkages to the school district.

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