



The Times

Excellent investment

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STAFF WRITER

Here's a tale of one city and polar forces.

Isles Inc., the community development organization, has been awarded a state grant of \$215,000 to help continue its work with YouthBuild. It's a program that for almost 15 years has helped Trenton's at-risk youth find their way from education to a career to self-reliance. Chief Operating Office Liz Johnson said the nonprofit will use the funding to pair business people with youth in apprenticeships and internships.

"Many people have an easy path to success because of their connections," Johnson said. "This is a way, in a sense, to create those connections to opportunities."

It's an excellent use of public money. What's more, it's an investment that will pay dividends down the line in terms of state funds that will not have to be spent on "prison, emergency health care, public assistance," as state Attorney General Anne Milgram observed in announcing the grant awards.

Founded in 1995, YouthBuild is an alternative school and training center for young people who have struggled in conventional school settings or have been incarcerated, according to Isles. Offering tough love, support and opportunities, it has guided many graduates to quality jobs or higher education.

The renewable grant will help Isles launch a new facet of the program, an initiative to pair up to 40 students with mentors for on-the-job training. Apprentices and interns will not only learn a trade or business skills; they also will learn, and benefit from, networking.

It's the kind of grass-roots effort that has distinguished Isles during nearly 30 years of strengthening the city by empowering individuals. As Isles continues to encourage young people to reach their potential, just a few blocks away, high school students and city police have been most discouraged.

Students leaving Trenton Central High School have had to walk a gauntlet of gang members demanding allegiance and hooligans hurling threats from cars and parking lots. The situation was so out of hand that police recently closed off Chambers Street as school let out to cut down on the potential for violence.

Principal Elizabeth Ramirez characterized the troublemakers as "kids who are marginalized, who have dropped out, who have nothing better to do than come up and harass our students."

They sound like kids who could benefit greatly from Youth Build. They're part of the neverending challenge facing Isles as it works to improve the chances of children in the city. State funds couldn't have gone to a better use than helping in that endeavor.

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