Program Will Assist Schools' Drop-outs

Lafayette — "The purpose of education goes far beyond just studying and learning to think. We must give those students who don’t go on to college a skill to make them employable. And we’re not meeting these students’ needs." These were the comments of Ernest A. Landry, Lafayette parish school board member and director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps program (NYC).

“About 800 students in this parish dropped out of school in the last three years,” he explained. “In 1964, there were 388 school drop-outs. And those who quit school are not all hoodlums. Many of them have poor people’s reasons for dropping out. We’ve got to reach them.”

And forward-thinking Landry intends to do just that. With the help of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington, he hopes to set up a pilot demonstration research project for drop-outs which would determine the needs of drop-outs and seek positive ways to help them become more employable.

With NYC going strong in Lafayette parish (487 students are in the program), Landry intends to use that as a basis for his drop-out project. The Neighborhood Youth Corps, part of the federally supported War on Poverty program, provides jobs to young people, 16-21 years old, from poverty-stricken homes. The workers are paid $1.25 an hour and work 30 hours a week in the summer. Up to now, only students in school have been chosen for NYC.

At Landry’s suggestion, the school board, sponsoring agent for NYC, announced that school dropouts will also be chosen for the Youth Corps with special preference given to drop-outs. For the remainder of the summer, the drop-outs will work the usual 30 hours a week.

In the fall, they will work 20 hours a week and attend classes 10 hours a week in the afternoons and evenings to learn special technical skills. Schools chosen to give these classes are Northside, Paul Breaux elementary and high schools and N.P. Moss school. Technically-trained teachers will be hired to give such courses. Regular in-school students in the NYC program will work 10 hours a week.

Landry, who has a master’s degree in government with a minor in law, also plans to conduct surveys to determine the needs of the drop-out, the trend or change from interest in college to vocational and technical training, and to trace the actual drop-outs in Lafayette Parish for the last three years.

We want to know what has happened to these drop-outs, where they live, if they’re employed, where the schools failed to meet their needs and what has to be done to remedy the situation,” Landry emphasized.

And he continued, "The South as a whole lacks sound technical training. If we could train these people in skills, it would open a labor market for industry here. As it is, industries hesitate to come into the state because they are afraid that they can’t find the technical workers for their industry."

If the proposed research project is approved by Washington, Landry also hopes to develop a curriculum that would aid students who do well at skilled jobs. Such a curriculum for the technically-skilled would offer a diploma with a dual transcript — one geared to the college entrance requirements and one to aid employability in vocational and technical fields.

Landry plans to utilize the NYC funds of $525,000 for the drop-out students who apply, with the possibility of extending the federal aid another $50,000 if necessary. He has not yet worked out a proposed budget for the research project.

In 1961, Landry compiled extensive reports and figures on the need for a pilot project to help school drop-outs. He outlined the problem and proposed various solutions to the school board and the community. Until the War on Poverty program was established, the plans remained just paperwork.

“We’re past the talking stage, and now we’re able to make concrete recommendations,” Landry said, smilingly. “The Economic Opportunity Act is the answer to the prayers of poor people and to a bettering education,” he continued, with a glow in his eyes which expressed the long, hard work of a man who had a dream and who now sees the possibility of making that dream a reality.

Man With a Vision

Ernest A. Landry, visiting teacher for Lafayette Parish and director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps, has his sights set on bettering education in the area as well as helping the young people of Louisiana.

“Education is an evolving process. We have a good system,” Landry said, “but we must always work to improve it.”

At present, Landry, with the cooperation of the Lafayette Parish school board, is preparing a request for federal funds under the anti-poverty act for a pilot demonstration research project for school drop-outs. The project would determine the needs of drop-outs through intensive surveys and seek positive ways to answer these needs.

“Students who are retarded in reading are prime subjects for dropping out of school,” Landry explained. “There is also need to offer more technical and practical courses in our high schools to help students learn a particular skill.”