

Skills-Training Policy Opening Doors to Jobs

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SAN JOSE, Calif., Oct. 17 — For the last eight years researchers have clocked and gauged the experiences of several thousand single mothers here and in three other cities, trying to answer one of the most elusive questions in social policy: how to turn welfare recipients into workers.

As a result they are praising the approach of a San Jose program that stresses tangible job skills, rather than the popular back-to-basics regimen of remedial English and mathematics. No matter how well the women here are able to read or compute, they quickly get their hands on circuit boards, printing presses, typewriters and frying pans.

This approach is markedly different from the one that most states are using to carry out the Federal welfare-to-work law that took effect this month.

Praise for the Approach

Early reports show most states are emphasizing basic education. The backers of the experiment here say the basic-education approach may prove less productive and undermine the efforts at welfare reform.

"There's something that's so moti-

vating about thinking you are going to be in the real world, doing a real job, earning a real wage," said Phoebe Cottingham, an associate director at the Rockefeller Foundation, which paid for the \$12 million study. "That, to an adult, is so much more important than going back to a situation where you've failed before: sitting in a classroom."

Ms. Cottingham said the San Jose program in some ways recalled the vocational training in vogue decades ago, before the rise of the basic-education movement. But the program eliminates aptitude tests, she said, and offers counseling, child care and other supportive services that help disadvantaged adults adapt to the workplace.

Three of the four cities' programs supported by the Rockefeller Foundation stressed the basic skills, but made no difference in the women's lives, according to an independent evaluation. Those programs were run by private organizations in Atlanta, Providence, R.I., and Washington. The single mothers there who received the training were no more likely to be employed, or to see their earnings rise, than a control group of similar women who did not join the program.

By contrast, women at the Center for Employment Training in San Jose were 27 percent more likely to have jobs a year later than those in a similar group who received no training. And their earnings were 47 percent higher.

The women in all four programs were members of minorities, and all had young children.

The San Jose gains are much larger than those reported from welfare-to-work tests in the early 1980's that were hailed as successes and were used to garner support for the training requirements in the law passed by Congress in 1988 to overhaul welfare.

Wide Latitude for States

That law, now being carried out, requires that by October 1990 each state enroll some welfare recipients in training or education programs. But states have wide latitude over the kind of training or education they provide.

Many experts have called the San Jose results impressive, but caution that they may be difficult to replicate. The program may have benefited, for instance, from being in Silicon Valley, where narrow vocational skills may be more marketable than in other regions with fewer jobs.

The women trained here were disproportionately Hispanic, like Maria Melendez and Marie Guzman, and many had substantial work histories. It is unknown whether the same approach would work as well for women of other ethnic groups or women more accustomed to long-term dependency on welfare benefits.

The researchers acknowledged these

Trying to find a new path to the elusive goal of welfare reform.

factors, but argued that the stress on particular job skills was decisive.

Among the success stories is Francisca Covarrubias, 42 years old, who enrolled three years ago after a separation from her husband forced her and her four daughters onto welfare.

While she had little English and few skills, Ms. Covarrubias, a Mexican immigrant, had much determination. She had received welfare for only two months when she sought the training and she had a work history that included seven years in a laundry.

The San Jose program put her directly in a vocational class — for sheet metal workers — despite deficiencies in English and math resulting from a Mexican education ending in the sixth grade. Rather than pursue a full-time study of remedial education, she fit it in for two hours a day, between stints on sheet metal machines.

"If I study English, it takes me two years maybe — I like to work," she said this week, in a fluency subsequently achieved in night school.

Difference in the Approach

After six months Ms. Covarrubias graduated to a \$5.25-an-hour job at Saucedo Metal Products, making parts for computer cabinets. She now earns \$9 an hour as head of the stockroom there.

Some welfare experts, particularly liberals, argue that the remedial education is important because the



Marie Guzman learned to solder computer parts in the program's electronics class.

modern economy needs workers who are literate and can adapt to changing technology. But in the Rockefeller study, many women in basic education classes grew discouraged and dropped out before the job training.

Some others have argued that actual work, even at low-paying, unskilled jobs, is preferable since it provides motivation and forces people to come to terms with the reality of the workplace. They say basic education or skills training should come later.

A year after joining the San Jose program, 46 percent of the women had jobs, according to Mathematica Policy Research Inc., a private company that evaluated all four sites. By contrast, the employment rate was only 36 percent for those San Jose women who applied for the program but were assigned at random to a control group and given no training.

The trained women earned an average of \$416 a month, as against \$283 for

the others, or an hourly wage of \$6.11, as against \$5.39.

Some analysts speculate that stress on vocational education produces higher short-term gains while those given remedial education may thrive more in the long run. But the researchers say early studies show that the pattern persists after 30 months.

The center started in 1967 with a small grant from a church. Now it operates out of a sprawling former junior high school with a budget of \$17 million and an alumni list reported at 50,000.

Strengths of San Jose Method

Its courses, which are supported by a variety of Government grants, include carpentry, child care, microelectronics assembly, printing, typing, cooking and shipping and receiving. Russell Tershy, who started the center and still runs it, lists several other keys to its success beyond the immediate immersion in tangible training, which costs about \$3,500 per person.

One factor, he said, is the reliance on an industrial advisory board, with representatives from dozens of the valley's top corporations. They keep the program current on what skills are needed and how to teach them. They also form a de facto placement network.

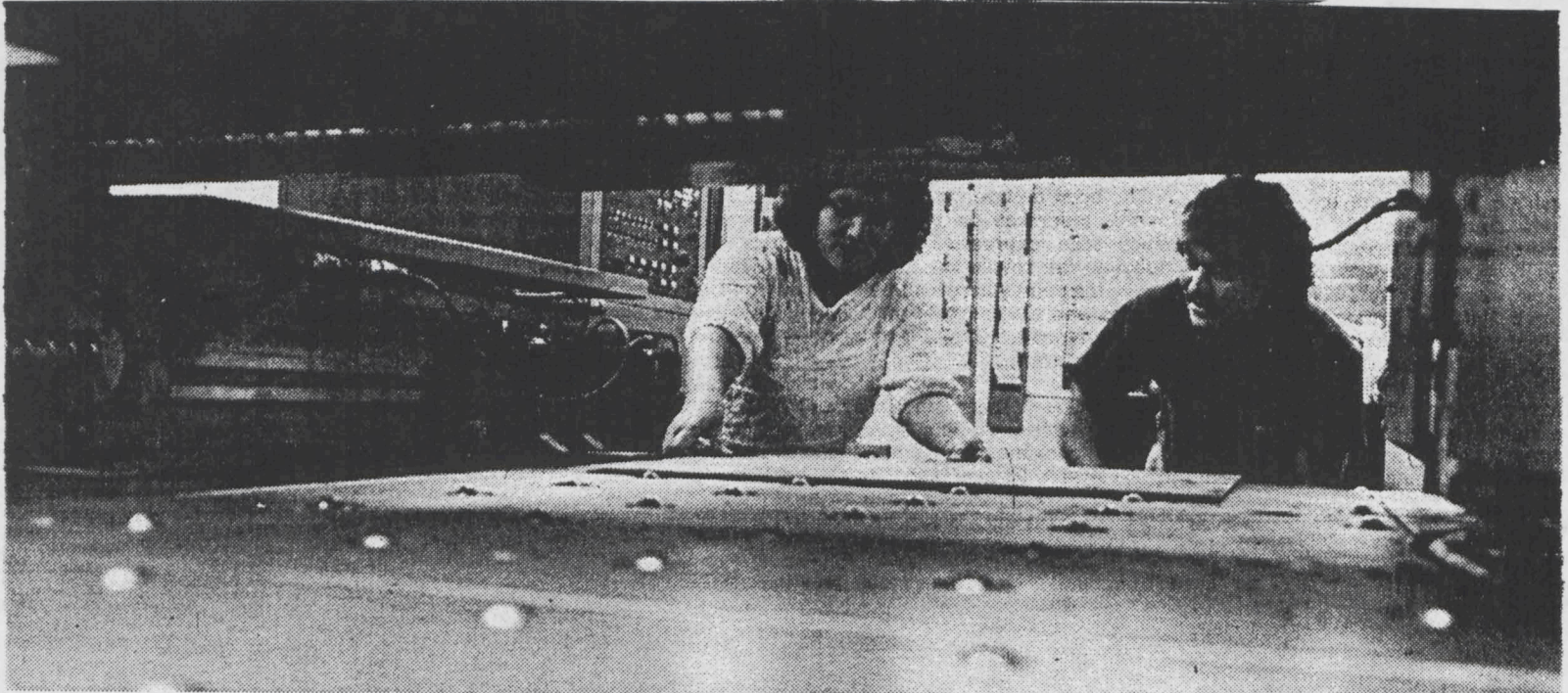
A second strength is the counseling and placement services, and here Ms. Covarrubias's experience is instructive.

Intimidated by the difficulty of running the sheet metal machines, she told her counselor, Ted Gonzales, that she wanted to try something easier. Mr. Gonzales, who has applied his you-can-do-it ethos here for two decades, told her she couldn't give up.

Ms. Covarrubias caught on.

Six months later, Mr. Gonzales donned the hat of the deal maker, inviting a supervisor from the metal products company to the school where he observed Ms. Covarrubias at work.

She was hired the next day.



Photographs by Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

As part of a job-training program for welfare recipients in San Jose, Calif., Jose Sandoval taught Maria Melendez how to use a sheet metal press.