

Attennn shun! Boot camps

They wear khakis, sleep in barracks, march to class and know they must answer to an 'enforcer' if their behaviour lapses. So why do thousands of US teenagers choose to attend schools run by the National Guard? Mary Hampshire finds out

December 3rd 1999

The Times Educational Supplement

FORWAAARRD march! Left. Left. Left, right, left..." yell the platoon leaders as cadets pace a quadrangle at Gillis Long Centre in the midday Louisiana heat. "They say that in the army, the women are mighty fine. They say that in the army, they march like Frankenstein!"

Welcome to a Louisiana school that is effectively a boot camp for teenage drop-outs. It's one of 27 Youth Challenge programmes that the US National Guard has been running since 1993. Pupils wear khaki uniforms, sleep in barracks, march to class, and get up at 5am for physical training. Swearing is punished. Teachers and fellow students are addressed as "Sir" or "Ma'am", there is no talk in class or during breaks, and permission is needed to make telephone calls. If students break the rules, they are sent to an "enforcer" for discipline. They are allowed no more than two visits home during their five-month stay - just in case they fall into old habits. And it's all voluntary.

The "tough love" programme, which gives 16 to 18-year-olds of both sexes (about 25 per cent of volunteers are girls) who have failed or dropped out of mainstream education a chance to get a qualification, is up and running in 26 states including Louisiana, Illinois, Georgia, Mississippi and Virginia; and there are plans to extend to all 50 states by 2002. Results so far are promising: nationally, 72 per cent of boot camp recruits pass their general education development test (equivalent to a high school diploma).

And anyone who believes it could never happen here should perhaps think again. The Government recently gave a private company led by a former army officer the go-ahead to help run nine of the UK's education action zones. World Challenge Expeditions will run a series of adventure courses for schools, including climbing, caving and camping. Its head, Charles Rigby, has hinted that cadet training could be an option. He says: "If it takes a uniform and a rifle to get youngsters going, then surely that has to be better than glue-sniffing or drug abuse."

Although plans for the UK are still a long way from anything going on in the US, the idea that military-style discipline can help educational achievement is at the root of both schemes. Colonel Tom Kirkpatrick, a lawyer who helps run Gillis Long, says: "You don't become educated without discipline. The students are

immersed in both. They achieve in five months what they haven't in five years. Every minute of every day is planned. One kid, who failed the entrance test, pleaded with me not to send him home."

Within a year of graduating, according to the National Guard's 1998 annual report, 76 per cent of students are in employment, college or the military - aided by a mentor who follows and encourages his or her progress for 12 months. Louisiana was among 10 states to pilot the programme in 1993 with Camp Beauregard, Pineville. Funded by the federal and state governments, it's now registered as an alternative school. The state has one of the highest high school drop-out rates in the country. Census Bureau figures averaged over 1995, 1996 and 1997, rank it third bottom of the 50 states, with only about 80 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds gaining their high school diploma or equivalent compared to 95 per cent in Maryland, which tops the table.

Set amid 360 acres, on the site of a former sugar plantation along the east bank of the Mississippi river, Gillis Long is Louisiana's second programme. When it opened in April, about 500 young people applied to attend, 245 of whom passed the vetting procedure. Applicants must be between 16 and 18, come from the local state, be drug-free, and have no criminal convictions. Twenty-six failed the drugs test. So far, 197 have stuck with the course.

"These are at-risk kids who didn't get the support or discipline they needed," explains Elizabeth Oliver, deputy director of Gillis Long. "They were going nowhere. Some were one step short of going to jail. But we have raised some kids' reading levels by four years - they had the ability of an 11 or 12-year-old when they arrived."

Oliver says the centre is much more than a boot camp, which is usually non-residential and focuses exclusively on discipline rather than education. "Parents call pleading with me to take their kids. But it's not suitable for everyone. The kid has to want to change. Actually, many crave discipline because it sets boundaries," she says. The students rise at 5am, then do drill and physical work from 5.30am to 8.30am, when they have breakfast. Lessons are four to six hours a day, usually from 9.30am to 11.30am and 1.30pm to 3.30pm. At lunchtime they practise drill and cadences (team songs) and eat. They complete 40 to 80 hours of community work during their stay, after classes and at weekends. Free time is from 7pm to 9pm, when they write letters, do extra study and socialise. At weekends, their free time is structured: they play sport, are taken on outings - for example, to museums - and do their community service.

The curriculum emphasises maths, English, information technology, and career guidance. Students also learn about aspects of citizenship, such as registering to vote and safe driving, as well as life skills such as anger management.

"We've adapted the traditional military philosophy and learned from early mistakes at Camp Beauregard, such as coming down hard," says Elizabeth

Oliver. "These kids haven't experienced any success in life. If we knock them back too much, they'll not bounce back again. "You have to give them a chance. At Camp Beauregard we caught one kid making weapons. His experience was the need to feel armed. It took us a long time to convince him he didn't need to any more. But," she adds, "some kids are so emotionally disturbed, this regime would be too stressful for them. We had a girl who had been sexually abused. She couldn't take orders from a male cadre."

For some students, these programmes are the first time anyone has listened to them. Counsellors discuss education and career goals; if psychiatric problems emerge, students can see a nurse on site or be referred to a specialist. During the first two weeks, pupils spend all their time doing "hardcore" physical exercise to develop fitness, teamwork, leadership and confidence. "The purpose," says Corporal Wes Hilborn, who's been the target of stray punches from frustrated pupils, "is to create the right frame of mind and to let them know we are in charge. We talk loudly to intimidate. There's a lot of hollering, sweating and crying. They are nervous and tense. Some have anger problems. One boy put his fist through a window."

Brendon Rousell, 19, from La Place, says his first few days were tough. "I cried and I wanted to go home. But it was a case of now or never. I was doing bad in school. I couldn't be bothered. I'd get stoned and sleep all day. Now when I wake up I want to do something with my day. When I get out I'd like to apply for the US Air Force."

Derrick Toussint, 17, from New Orleans, says some of his friends think he's crazy being here, but others are proud of him. "When I first came, I had attitude. At high school, I kept getting expelled. I hung out with the wrong crowd and gangs. One of my best friends is in jail. If my mum hadn't stayed on my case, I'd probably be dead by now. "She said, 'You've got to get through the tough times to be somebody'. I realised I had to straighten myself out. I've humbled myself to go through this. I've been getting 90 per cent in my tests, doing good. I hope to go into the Marines."

The classroom atmosphere at Gillis Long is strikingly tranquil. There's near hush, except for a few sniggers at unexpected guests. Teacher Jennifer Rabb, 24, is going through TABE results (Test of Adult Basic Education including maths, English language and reading) with a class of 30. "The key to their compliance," she says, "is the discipline outside the classroom. If they talk, answer me back or fall asleep, I've got back-up. I just open the door and walk them to the enforcer." In another classroom, a group is doing typing speed tests. They are also answering questions on presenting a curriculum vitae, citizenship, and self-esteem.

All work at their own pace, overseen by teacher David Stanley. "They're willing to learn because basic needs, such as food and exercise, are met," he says. "In the

past, I've taught kids who are hungry, and who've had no sleep because their mum and dad fought all night. They weren't receptive. And the curriculum is flexible. We do not force a child to reach a level for the sake of it." David Stanley says he felt undermined in the public school system. "I'd get verbally abused by parents, and worry about being sued for saying the wrong thing or if an accident happened. Here I get on with the job of teaching."

Educational psychologists are cautious about the programme. Gary Gottfredson, a member of the American Psychological Association who runs a private practice in Maryland, says: "It sounds like a breakthrough. But I'm sceptical, because the evidence on drop-outs shows (specialised) programmes are only slightly effective." But Dr Charles Thompson, of the University of Tennessee, says: "There's a knee-jerk reaction in this country to anything military. But when kids survive something tough and improve their grades, they feel a sense of accomplishment. It sounds as though these kids have potential but may not have had anybody care enough to set limits and enforce them before."

As Jessica Thibodeaux, 16, from Labadieville, says: "I came here to straighten out my life. Now I've got one goal: to graduate with honours. Having survived hardcore, I've a lot more respect for myself."