

## **Berkeley Technology Academy Apprenticeship Program Brings New Hope to Youth**

Young people are fresh, hopeful, and versatile enough to meet new challenges when they're offered chances to do so, and that is the underlying premise behind the Berkeley Technology Academy (BTECH) Apprenticeship Program.

Formerly known as "East Campus," the Berkeley Technology Academy is a public secondary school that serves as an outlet for the highly-regarded Berkeley High School, one of the more acclaimed educational institutes in the state. The student body at the Academy is comprised of students (mostly students of color) who for one reason or another were deemed unsuitable or unprepared for study at Berkeley High.

Unfortunately—but predictably—the Academy has traditionally suffered from a lack of funding, a lack of numbers and frankly a lack of attention and interest from the Berkeley School District. The African-American and Hispanic kids who've been diverted to Berkeley Tech deserve better, and that's what the BTECH Apprenticeship Program aims to deliver.

### **How the BTECH Apprenticeship Program Works**

Conceived and launched in early 2018 by Berkeley Technology Academy principle Adarius McDonald, the BTECH Apprenticeship Program connects black students with black business owners throughout the Bay Area, to provide direct learning opportunities and "hands-on" practical experience for young people interested in pursuing (or at least exploring) careers in business.

Based on survey responses, teen participants are matched with business owners based on their learning preferences and personal interests. Over the course of the 12-week program, apprentices interact regularly in person and online with their chosen mentors, observing, asking questions and gaining first-hand experience in the entrepreneurial world.

The Apprenticeship Program is appropriate for those who plan (or hope) to pursue business education beyond high school, or for students who dream of starting their own businesses one day and are anxious to expand their knowledge of how real entrepreneurs operate. The cultural background that students and business owners share is a vital aspect of the initiative, since young people need to know that their ambitions are realistic and that others who've walked in their shoes have achieved noteworthy things.

The program is voluntary and its overhead expenses are minimal, making this initiative ideal for a school that must get by on a limited budget. The approach of the BTECH Apprenticeship Program is simple and commonsensical, but if successful it could have a revolutionary impact on the way educational initiatives designed for underserved communities are planned and implemented.

### **Higher Expectations Means Higher Achievement**

While the concept has been somewhat forgotten, apprenticeship is the oldest form of job training. Young people with gifts to be developed but barriers to overcome (through no fault of their own), can benefit tremendously from this type of direct, experiential learning, especially under the mentorship of people who share many of their perspectives and understand their life experiences.

For kids who've been shunted aside and dismissed, or at the very least been burdened by low expectations, opportunities to expand their horizons are often few and far between. Despite their

natural talents and desire to improve themselves and secure a better future, too often these young people become trapped in cycles of underachievement, reinforced by the inaction of school boards, bureaucrats, and political figures who adopt cynical attitudes.

But the scent of change is in the air. The BTECH Apprenticeship Program is an initiative that defies the old pattern and challenges its assumptions at their core, and if the feedback from participants and the long-term results are positive the idea could and should spread quickly to other schools.

Programs that engage kids and leave them excited about learning will inevitably inspire achievement, and the BTECH Apprenticeship Program was created to accomplish this mission. Time will tell if it succeeds, but at this early stage it is generating significant enthusiasm from students, parents, teachers, and the local business community, and that is the very definition of a promising start.