

WORKNET GRADUTES STUDENTS

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Sandy Lemas, left, the supervising specialist at Worknet, and Margie Cotta, the Youth Opportunity Program director, congratulate program participants during a wrap-up ceremony on July 23, encouraging them to continue making future goals.

Learning what it means to succeed, a group of 32 at-risk students wrapped up the six-week, 192-hour Youth Opportunity Program at Worknet on Friday.

A number of local business supervisors attended to commemorate their summertime employees, saying the six weeks had passed too quickly.

The government sponsored Youth Opportunity Program pairs youth between 14 and 18 years old with a local business, allowing them to earn an income and learn skills for the work environment.

This year, Margie Cotta, the program director, said she focused on the importance of goals and helping students explore who they are by teaching them about different types of intelligence and learning preferences.

Cotta said she wanted students to ask themselves, "Where do I fit?" and make future goals.

"The more you find out about yourself, resources, and job opportunities the more successful you will be," Sandy Lemas of Worknet told the students during the send-off celebration.

Cotta said the group also visited the State Capitol and the California Museum to allow the students to see what the state is all about.

Not only is the program designed to prepare students for careers, but it also strives to encourage them to continue to work hard in academics.

Bernadette Castanada of Worknet said this type of employment training has been available for youth since President Kennedy's war on poverty. "It showed them poverty was not a helpless cause," she said.

She said the summer jobs helped students improve their grades and see that they could be a part of something worthwhile and, in turn, help the economy. For Cotta, the effort to support today's program participants continues into the academic year.

Every two weeks she visits schools or calls campus career counselors to check in on her students. "If we are investing time in our youth we are investing time in ourselves," she said.

As Friday's open house came to a close, Cotta's investment in the graduating students, some of whom had been attending the program for four years, became evident.

There were several students missing from the celebration because they had been hired by their summertime employer.

Others said they had goals to go to college. Lemas said the goal was to have 50 percent of the students get a job or go to college. But at this point, she said the program had seen 89 percent of their students get a job or go to college.

Cotta said of the 32 students in the program this summer, 12 had already been hired and eight others had recently applied for a job. "That's pretty good, I think," she said.

Cotta said that seeing her students succeed is what makes her job worthwhile. "I love to see the smile on their faces," she said.