

**MONDAY MORNING GROUP OF WESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY  
ANNUAL ADVOCACY TRIP – SACRAMENTO, CA  
FEBRUARY 6-7, 2023**

**CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD YOUTH CHALLENGE PROGRAM**

**ISSUE:** Students dropping out of high school is an enduring challenge for both California and the nation. Data from the California Department of Education indicated that more than 47,000 California high school students dropped out of school in 2020-2021.

**ACTION:** The Monday Morning Group urges the State to join federal and local entities and become an active partner in Youth Challenge Programs. Federal funding supplies 75% of the operating costs, with the state required to provide 25% of the funding. Local governments provide civilian teachers and educational administration.

While state and national leaders have demanded that schools, communities, and families make a major effort to retain students, the dropout rate remains high. Research from RAND Corporation, updated in 2022, confirms that the Challenge program has positive impacts on educational and labor market outcomes. Additionally, RAND found that life-coping skills stressed in Challenge appear to increase participants' noncognitive, social and emotional skills. Furthermore, RAND also found that the relationship between social, emotional skills, and long-term outcomes is well established.

**BACKGROUND:** To combat the societal strain upon the nation when students drop of high school, The United States Congress established the Youth Challenge Program in 1993 under United States Code, title 32, section 509. The law tasked the National Guard Bureau (NGB) to develop an educational program for the thousands of at-risk youths who were dropping out of high school daily. The California Military Department (CMD) participates in this program through a cooperative agreement with NGB.

A study by the Rand Corporation found that National Guard Youth Challenge Program generates labor market earnings and other benefits of \$2.66 for every dollar expended on the program and an estimated return on investment of 16%; and that admission to a National Guard Youth Challenge program is projected to increase the present discounted lifetime earnings of Challenge admittees by \$43,514 (2010).

The CMD Youth Challenge Program provides an alternative educational opportunity set in a quasi-military environment for students ages 16-18 who have dropped out of school or are not progressing towards graduation. In partnership with the County Office of Education, programs consist of two phases—a 5 ½ month residential phase, followed by a 12-month post-residential phase involving screened and trained mentors who provide guidance and support to students. The residential phase is focused on increasing education and life skills crucial for personal, professional, and civic growth, and emphasizes eight core components: Academic Excellence, Life Coping Skills, Job Skills, Health and Hygiene, Responsible Citizenship, Service to Community, Leadership/Followership and Physical Fitness.

At-risk students enrolling in Challenge programs are often youth from socioeconomically challenged and /or migrant, English-learning backgrounds. The California Department of Education's 2020-21 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate reported a high school graduation rate of 80.4% for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, which is significantly lower when compared to a 90.5% rate for non-disadvantaged students. The report also reflected a much lower graduation rate for English-learning students of 67.1%, when compared to the 86.1% graduation rate for non-English learning students. Support of this proposal offers an opportunity for improved high school graduation outcomes for these population groups. Historically, over one-third of our Challenge graduates receive their high school diploma during the residential or post-residential phase of the program.

There are 40 Challenge Programs nationwide. These programs draw high school dropouts (or students at-risk of dropping out) from across the nation. All programs have substantial representation from minority groups. Students must volunteer for the program.

California's three Challenge Academies graduate approximately 1,200 cadets per year and are the most successful Challenge programs in the nation. The first Challenge academy, the Grizzly Youth Challenge Academy (GYA, <https://www.grizzlyyouthacademy.org/>) was established in 1998 at Camp San Luis Obispo. The second program,

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Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy (SYA, <https://www.sunburstadmissions.com/>) was established in 2007 at Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos. The newest program, Discovery Challenge Academy (DCA, <https://iamdiscovery.org/>) is in San Joaquin County at the Sharpe Army Depot in Lathrop, CA.

Surrounding communities to a Youth Challenge Academy are enriched by the presence of the program and in turn provide service and employment opportunities to the students as they progress through the residential and post-residential phases of the program. The California National Guard has developed dozens of partnerships with educators, law enforcement officials, juvenile justice officials, civic groups and political leaders that directly contribute to the success of the program. The State of California benefits from this cooperative effort to assist families with at-risk youth by assisting in the prevention of youth from entering juvenile justice or welfare systems. The Challenge Program turns high school dropouts into productive, tax-paying, law-abiding citizens for our state.