



Jim Ketelsen, board member, Project GRAD

WHATEVER IT TAKES

JIM KETELSEN TAKES ON URBAN AMERICA'S EDUCATION REFORM

When Jim Ketelsen read a 1978 report on the state of inner-city education in the United States, he was shocked by the high student dropout rate. So in 1981, he directed Houston-based Tenneco Inc., where he was chairman and CEO, to do what many corporations were doing and adopt the city's lowest-performing public high school.

The company spent eight years providing nearly everything Jefferson Davis High needed – mentors, tutors, college scholarships, professional retreats for teachers, and building repairs – but Ketelsen was far from pleased with the results. “After spending a fair amount of money and time,” he says, “we didn't see any significant improvement. While we had an increase in the number of graduating students,

the bottom half were still dropping out. So I decided to try something else.”

College attendance has tripled in Project GRAD schools, and high school graduation has increased by 86 percent.

When Ketelsen retired from Tenneco in 1992, he turned the program into a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. The new Houston-based initiative, Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves

Dreams), was a comprehensive school reform effort that targeted the core problems in urban education: inconsistent instruction, limited opportunities to access higher education, and problems at home. “It's not the kids,” Ketelsen says. “We've found these kids really can do well if they have the support. But they need more support than the average student.”

Realizing that the ninth grade was too late to intervene and have an impact on most students, Ketelsen implemented a framework of programs that began in kindergarten and worked within “feeder” systems of elementary, middle, and high schools that served the same population of students. The approach included a consistent and challenging curriculum from elementary school through high

school with specially purchased math and reading programs. Through the efforts of its 90 employees – including schoolteachers from the Houston Independent School District – Project GRAD also provided intensive teacher training and support, monitored safe and orderly classrooms, counseled families in crisis, and awarded college scholarships.

Over the past decade, Davis High and 80 other Houston area schools, which together serve more than 90 percent minority students, have signed up to participate in Project GRAD. The schools are carefully evaluated for funding on the basis of their level of need for and interest in the program. The results have been transforming. Achievement levels are up; discipline problems are down. College attendance has tripled in Project GRAD schools, high school graduation has increased by 86 percent at Davis, and students have earned scholarships to Princeton, Duke, Cornell, and Columbia universities. The program's 51 percent college graduation rate for Hispanic students is double the national average. “We have a motto: Whatever It Takes,” says Ketelsen. “I think we borrowed that from the old Houston Rockets,” he laughs.

Project GRAD has taken that motto out of Houston. Today, the organization assists 133,000 disadvantaged students at 122 schools, from Newark, N.J., to Tyonek, Alaska, and Ketelsen's goal is to further expand the program. The demand is certainly there. “We have a waiting list of cities wanting Project GRAD,” he says. Supporters of the program have raised more than \$90 million in public and private funds, and approximately 25 percent of the program is federally funded.

At age 74, Ketelsen remains passionate about the program he founded, and he doesn't plan to let it go anytime soon. “I get letters from kids – some of them have graduated and are now teaching at our schools,” he says. “I hear from them that it's been so worthwhile that they want to give something back to the community. It's so gratifying.” – *Dominique Channell*