

The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

January 28, 2012

Back to Classroom for Skills Not Taught in High School

By Mathew R. Warren



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Ivette Gongón-Volmar leading a financial literacy workshop in the Bronx.

On a recent morning in a small classroom in the Bronx, Ivette Gongón-Volmar asked a group of students to list their needs.

“Food,” “water,” “education,” “jobs,” “housing,” “transportation” and “health insurance” were among the things shouted out as Ms. Gongón-Volmar wrote them down in blue marker on a white dry-erase board.

Hanging on a wall was a portrait of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with the words “I Have a Dream” below the image. Directly across the room hung a portrait of President Obama with one word underlined: “Destiny.”

“What about wants?” Ms. Gongón-Volmar asked the 11 students, who were in their third and final session of a financial literacy workshop.

“Money,” “designer clothes,” “a car,” “a big house,” “a big TV,” “fame,” “a career,” the students called out.

“The world,” Montel Goodridge, 18, added, as the other students grinned and nodded in approval.

The students, all in their late teens or early 20s, were being taught to reconcile their needs and wants with the reality that those things came at a price. For many young people, for example, the concept that a credit card is not free money is not fully understood.

Currently, [only four states](#) — Missouri, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia — [require high school students to take a class on personal finance before graduation](#), according to the Jump\$tart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy, a nonprofit organization that promotes financial literacy.

Ms. Gongón-Volmar’s workshop was offered as part of the Young Adult Outreach Initiative, a free three-month program offered by New Settlement Apartments, a nonprofit organization that provides affordable housing and community services in the Bronx.

The program also helps participants, many of whom left school before graduation, with job-readiness training and educational services like preparation for the high school equivalency diploma test. As an incentive to complete the program, participants receive a monthly stipend of \$200.

The financial literacy workshop focuses on three subjects: banking, credit and budgeting.

“In order for them to become work ready, it’s important for them to know about banking, get them to think about moving forward and establishing credit,” Ms. Gongón-Volmar said after class. “They need to be aware of what’s on their pay stub, how to read it. It gets them thinking about how to prioritize their money.”

Ms. Gongón-Volmar handed out budgeting charts to the students and told them to write down what they spent each day and compare that with their income.

“I can’t manage my money,” Regina Rice, 22, said during the class. “Yesterday I bought two pairs of headphones, and I don’t even know why.”

Ms. Gongón-Volmar said, “If you write everything down, you’ll be able to see all the money you’re wasting.”

In the hourlong class, she went over a range of topics, including understanding pay stubs and W-4 and W-2 tax forms.

She said they should avoid tax preparers who offered rapid refunds and check-cashing businesses that took a percentage — businesses that are common in low-income communities. She stressed that they should not give up a portion of their money when there were alternatives, like free tax preparers and banks that cash checks without taking a cut.

“Don’t shortchange yourselves,” she said.

After class, Ms. Gongón-Volmar added: “We want them to be aware that there are other options out there. Even if it is \$2 at the check-cashing place, it’s still \$2.”

Miguel Nazario, 18, said, “They don’t teach you this in school.”

Mr. Nazario, who had left his job of four months as a cashier at McDonald’s, said he planned to get his G.E.D. and hoped to go on to college, a dream shared by many of his peers in the class.

“There’s no point to stop at the G.E.D.,” said Mr. Goodridge, who was determined to get a master’s degree in human services and become a youth counselor. “My goal is to get the most out of school.”

Mr. Goodridge said he was grateful the workshop was part of the program. “The main reason they’re teaching us this stuff is so people won’t take advantage of us and that we know how to save,” he said.

Ms. Gongón-Volmar is the assistant director of the Workforce Advocacy and Support Initiative, which teams with New Settlement on programs like the Young Adult Outreach Initiative and is run by the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. A portion of Ms. Gongón-Volmar’s salary as workshop instructor is paid through the fund.

Ms. Gongón-Volmar said the workshop served as a safety net for her students, who might otherwise be ill equipped to navigate the financial pitfalls they could face as independent adults. “No one is teaching them how to do these things,” she said. “They’re set up for failure.”

After class, Krystal Bautista, 18, who said she wanted to go to law school and become a criminal prosecutor, admitted that before attending the workshop, she had not completely grasped how credit cards worked.

“I probably would have ended up owing a lot of money if I didn’t have these classes,” Ms. Bautista said. “I feel like I learned to be more responsible with my money and the choices I make. One bad decision can mess up your whole future.”