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Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

Mission of Parkway: Help Students of Color Advance “higher and further” New Strategies, Opportunities Created in All Schools

by Peggy Magee

Sixty African-American students who are enrolled in challenge math and science classes at the five Parkway middle schools gathered at Maryville University last October to attend a day-long summit on how to take charge of their education.

The students, divided into three groups, followed a schedule that included break-out sessions on decision-making, owning their education, self-advocacy and networking. Each session, taught by middle school faculty, engaged students in activities and discussions. In the final session of the day, they worked on setting individual academic goals and creating action steps to reach them.

The middle school summit, the first of what is planned to be a recurring event, is part of a district-wide initiative in Parkway called Diversity in Action (DIA). The mission of DIA is to study, confront and eliminate systemic and individual hurdles that inhibit African American and other students of color from experiencing success commensurate with their white counterparts, according to committee co-chair, Charlotte Ijei, Parkway's Director of Pupil Personnel and



Parkway Central DIA building leader David Watson talks to a group of middle school students about the importance of making good impressions and building relationships. He was leading a session called Working the Network at the middle school summit, held last October as part of the district's Diversity in Action initiative. "Everything you do now affects you in the future," the math specialist told students. Photo by Peggy Magee

See Inside: **New Strategies**

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New Strategies (continued)

Diversity. "In Parkway's eyes, the achievement gap is less about failing students and more about students capable of excellence who are allowed to accept mediocrity. The goal of DIA is to encourage students who are comfortable with average to sub-par academic effort to strive for and achieve brilliance."

Acting on that commitment, the district in 2009 formed a leadership team to formulate a comprehensive plan designed

improvement plan – that is updated annually based on measurable results, regular assessments and other data, including parent and student surveys and interviews. The building leaders also serve as resources for staff, support for students and a sounding board for school decisions.

While action plans differ among the schools, many share common strategies, including mentorship and acceleration opportunities, participation in the district's Spirit of Excellence program (which recognizes African-American students who meet high academic standards), as well as social justice and diversity training for staff. Throughout the district, assemblies and meetings are conducted for both DIA students and their parents "to communicate our expectations and stress to students and parents the importance of putting forth the necessary effort in order to arrive at the desired results," explains Charlotte Ijei. The end goal, she says, "is to move students of color to the highest level of achievement so that in high school they are ready to take on advanced courses which will afford them more opportunities and choices when it comes to college, as well as equip them for success at not only the next level but throughout life."

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In the elementary grades – the starting point for shaping students to be high Achievers – Carman Trails School is among the many elementary schools in Parkway to provide challenge classes led by the gifted teacher for not only qualifying Mosaics students, but also to those students who show potential but are not identified as gifted. Being selected to work with the Mosaics teacher, "shows these children they are capable and puts on their radar the idea of taking classes which provide more challenge," points out principal Beth Wendling, DIA building administrator. This strategy of targeting those students of color who are at levels of achievement below the top tier to receive more resources, opportunities or support has become a standard practice across the board in Parkway schools.

to challenge *all* students to reach their highest potential. The 82 members of the DIA team include district counselors, building administrators, teachers, school counselors and other personnel representing virtually every department in the school system. Each of Parkway's 28 schools, plus its early childhood center, has two representatives – an administrator and teacher or counselor – who serve on the DIA team, which meets regularly – either as a whole, by area (north, south, central, west) or by grade level (elementary, middle and high school).

The DIA goals and objectives, which encompass connecting and communicating with African-American students, curriculum enrichment strategies, parent engagement, staff development and district hiring practices, were approved by the Parkway Board of Education last May.

The DIA leaders in the schools are responsible for promoting its principles and initiatives in their building. They create an action plan – specific to the school and in conjunction with its comprehensive

For example, Ross Elementary uses real world scenarios for some DIA students "so they can envision what is possible for them, which triggers their desire to excel," explains assistant principal Jason Adams. The school arranged for one little girl interested in nursing to spend some time with the school nurse and be introduced to the section of the library devoted to the field of nursing. A helicopter was brought on the school grounds for a young boy interested in avia-



In a weekly afterschool program at Parkway Southwest Middle School, extra support and attention is given to students of color to keep them motivated and on track. Here, seventh grader Coryan Rhodes receives guidance and words of encouragement from communications arts teachers Shenita Luckett, who is also the DIA building leader, and Neil Daniels. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

tion! “We try to be intentional about the added support we provide,” says Adams.

Moving more students of color into middle school challenge classes has prompted Carmen Trails and other elementary schools to begin identifying and tracking potential candidates in the fourth-grade. In fifth grade, all DIA students participate in a transition visit to their middle school (in addition to the one for *all* fifth graders) where, according to Wendling, they meet that school’s DIA leader who pumps them up about opportunities in store for them and what it takes to be successful.

Being involved and engaged in the school also makes for academic success. Wendling reports that her school met its DIA goal of increasing African-American student participation in activities such as the juggling, chess and kickball clubs and before-and-after school tutoring sessions. “When children have a sense of belonging, they are apt to take more risks in school and do better academically,” she notes.

Relationships are another critical piece and at Carman Trails, 50 African-American students are each paired with a teacher or staff mentor who regularly checks in with them and offers praise and advice, guided by the communication they maintain with the child’s teacher. “We monitor their progress, encourage their successes and help them believe in themselves,” says Wendling.

In addition to adult mentors, Ross Elementary brings into its classrooms high school students from Parkway North who talk to DIA students and help them with

their work. “Our goal is to increase the number of students of color who mentor and help,” notes Jason Adams.

In all Parkway schools, more emphasis is being placed on staff development. Six of the faculty at Carman Trails have attended the district-sponsored social justice retreat and at Ross, 15 teachers participate in the SEED group (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity). At both schools, staff meetings regularly include discussions and exercises that focus on teacher perceptions, expectations and performance. “We continually examine our mental models because our belief system impacts the success of students,” notes Wendling.

Continuing at the middle school level, purposeful strategies exist to help African-American students advance “higher and further,” notes Darryl Diggs, science teacher at Parkway South Middle and DIA building leader. “As our schools become increasingly diverse, we must change our way of thinking and cultivate new practices,” he notes. And staff have enthusiastically stepped up, taking on additional assignments such as volunteering to be mentors to DIA students. “The push is toward more relationship building, personal conversations and parent discussions, which together, keep students engaged, motivated and on track.” If a student starts to slip, even just slightly, the staff asks questions, works on study habits, steers the child to tutoring and, most of all, stays on top of the situation until it improves, he adds.

Those kind of vigilant, checking-up-on practices are a priority at Southwest Middle

School, where in addition to its mentoring program, DIA students join up every Wednesday after school with communication arts teacher Shenita Luckett, the DIA building leader. Enrolled in Luckett’s program are eight students who take challenge classes and 15 who receive additional enrichment and opportunities for leadership because they show the *potential* to be challenged. “My program is an extra piece of support where I guide the students on issues they face, self-advocacy skills, future goals and next steps,” explains Luckett, who, along with Darryl Diggs, planned the middle school summit. “It’s also a chance for them to get homework help.”

When trimester grades come out, Luckett – who keeps data on every DIA student – compares grade point averages, both individually and as a group, to the previous grading periods and uses the results as talking points. If it’s good news, she celebrates their successes. If relapses occur, “It’s an opportunity to put them on notice about the tougher coursework that lies ahead and to prime them for it by boosting their confidence and offering strategies and tips.”

The school also sponsors a weekly Saturday tutoring program at the city’s Carpenter Branch Library and a social justice committee for teachers that features discussions on equity issues, self-examination practices and problem solving regarding student situations.

Social justice training for students, called Honoring All Voices, is also part of

DIA. Workshops on respect and responsibility have been presented to fourth, sixth and tenth graders, leaving them charged to take a stand for social justice in their schools and to serve as allies for their fellow students.

The high school level follows the course set forth in lower grades of “expanding our mindset by not simply directing our attention to lower performing students, but also working with students in the middle and pushing them to achieve more,” notes Jenny Marquart, principal of Parkway North High and DIA building administrator. That approach, she confirms, has succeeded in students being “more ready and more confident” when they enter high school than in the past. Once in high school, she says, “Our goal is that they start off in the ninth grade in honors classes and finish up in grade 12 in advanced placement classes.”

In addition to test and assessment data being used for honors and challenge class placement, staff recommendations also weigh in as qualifying criteria. “The relationships teachers build with students give

tive outcomes she has seen for students recommended for honors classes. “These students, who otherwise may not have been given a chance to experience the challenge, often perform quite well and grow in confidence to the point where they want to try other honors level classes,” she notes.

The message that Parkway North wants all its students to hear, according to Harris, is: “Honors classes are calling you!”

The district’s overall commitment to inspire students of color to stretch themselves to new heights has sparked renewed enthusiasm among faculty and staff, notes DIA committee co-chair Sara Moulder. “It has always been a focus of ours, but now it’s been pulled into the spotlight. There is so much excitement about Diversity in Action!” As a district counselor, Moulder has conversa-

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them unique insight as to a student’s ability to handle the rigor of the more intense work,” points out Marquart, adding that typically the recommending teacher continues to support the student’s pursuits, which positively impacts his or her effort and confidence in the honors class.

Also keeping a close eye on DIA students enrolled in honors classes at Parkway North is math teacher Joshlyn Harris, the DIA building leader. She meets with them monthly to discuss their progress which she monitors closely, contacting the teacher if concerns arise. Harris talks about the posi-

tions with bright African-American students who indicate how happy they are that more of their African-American classmates are now included in classes and programs for high-achievers. “They’ll say, ‘I used to be the only one in my class,’ and now they see others who look like them. It’s a beneficial situation for all our students.”

About DIA, Moulder says, “In a short time, we’ve accomplished so much. It’s exciting to think about what is yet to come.”

Students' Involvement in Parent Meetings Helps to Increase Attendance

by Peggy Magee

A group of 10 middle and high school students, all voluntary transfer students in the Hancock Place district, gather around a conference table in the vestibule of the high school guidance counselors' offices and respond openly and honestly to questions posed by counselors Cindy Mayer, Amanda Van Horn and Ginger Steinhaff.

They are members of Hancock's VICC advisory board who help the counselors plan the informational meetings held for voluntary transfer parents twice each year. Also in their advisory meetings, scheduled several times during the school year, these school leaders offer general insight and suggestions about issues affecting students from the city.

"What is the best way to make your parents aware of our next meeting," Mayer asked the students when they gathered in late February to plan the spring meeting, held at the elementary school. "What topics do you think they would be interested in? Do your parents know about accessing the web portal? Could your parents use babysitting for younger siblings?"

Mayer says the advisory group was started two years ago, "initially with the intent of trying to make our meetings more successful by designing them around the interests of parents and to enlist the students' help in getting their parents to attend." The idea came from a video course she took through Walden University called *Getting Parents on Your Side*. The planning dialogue spurs general discussions about day-to-day issues affecting the students' school experiences which, she says, is valuable in helping them achieve.

Advisory board member Marquis Stewart, a sophomore, says he and the other members had received background information about the VICC program and its purpose from the counselors. "A lot of people think it's just a transportation program, so it's important to know that it is a program that provides us with educational opportunities."

Equipped with that base of knowledge, the students realize the importance of their opinions as it relates to their education. "What we think matters a great deal," explains Marquis, "because this is about *our* education which leads us to go on to successful careers." He says the students are encouraged to share with their parents details of the meeting discussions so that they become more informed too.

This is seventh-grader Sirayira Alapbe's first year on the advisory board and she thinks it just makes sense for students to have a voice. After all, she notes, "We are the ones affected!"

When it comes time to plan the parent meetings, the counselors rely on the students. "Their feedback helps us in our planning," notes Mayer, "plus, getting the students on board makes it more likely for them to talk up the meeting to their parents, which improves attendance."

The counselors' idea for the fall meeting held at the high school – to recognize and showcase student achievement – was, not surprisingly, enthusiastically endorsed by the advisory board. Their instincts were correct as that meeting pulled in more parents than usual. Many students, including Marquis, received recognition for their accomplishments and one talented high schooler sang for the group, accompanied on the piano by her music teacher.

At the spring parent meeting, other students were commended – either for grades, attendance, behavior or meeting their accelerated reader goals. Marquis stood up and addressed parents about the transition from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school. "Time management, maturity and responsibility are needed to be successful," he told them. He also cited the various clubs and teams available to middle and high school students. Parents and children listened intently, eager to hear directly from a student.

Again, there were a good amount of families in attendance which supports Cindy Mayer's theory: "By getting students involved in the preparations and presentations of the meetings, parents are more likely to want to be there."



At the spring VICC parent meeting, Marquis Stewart, a sophomore at Hancock Place High, shares information about the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. Students are featured at the parent meetings, either speaking about their experiences or recognized for achievement.

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

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A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.

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Message from the CEO



Is the voluntary transfer program successful? This is a question that I am frequently asked and, I believe, it is critically important for me, as well as all of us, to be well prepared to answer affirmatively and passionately. Recently there has been considerable media attention related to the Turner vs. Clayton School District court case and this has increased the number of people in the community asking this very question. I frequently point to the compelling evidence that does indeed confirm the success of our program. Why else would parents and students choose to ride a bus for

almost an hour every day each way to and from school if they did not see the benefits of the program? In addition, we can point to graduation rates, test scores, and attendance rates which are all also indicative of the increased success rate and the benefits for students and their families to participate in the program.

However, I believe the most compelling evidence is demonstrated by the lifelong success achieved by the participants in the program. Many graduates of the program have continued on to college, obtained degrees in education, and are now teachers or administrators in the very districts they attended as students. Obviously, they saw the benefits of the program for them personally and decided to make a conscious decision to give back to the community and the program by helping to educate future graduates.

Other graduates have gone on to public service and are currently serving in the state legislature or working in other forms of government service. Students have also graduated from the program and have started their own successful businesses. The transfer students bring diversity to county schools and prepare resident students to be successful in future endeavors in college and careers where they will be expected to interact and work with a more diverse population. As highlighted in the current issue of the *Volunteer*, Parkway's Diversity in Action initiative provides opportunities and resources to help students of color achieve excellence. This program is a great model to create high expectations for all students which lead to mutual success and benefit for all.

Finally, while attending a VICC awards ceremony presented by one of the participating county districts, I heard personal stories of students that are exceedingly successful as a result of their participation in the program. I heard a high school student deliver a moving poem that he wrote which clearly communicated how he is benefiting from participating in the program and the difference it is making in his life. Despite the challenges all students face, the opportunities are even greater. Other high school students at this assembly shared the plans they have to attend college, the dreams ahead of them, and how caring teachers and administrators had prepared and motivated them to be successful.

The bottom line is that, as teachers, administrators and staff currently leading the students and parents participating in this program, it is each one of us who will most resoundingly answer the question regarding whether or not this program is successful. There will always be naysayers and critics and the best way to silence them is to lead students to demonstrate the difference the program has made in their lives and the opportunities it has opened up for them. Tony Robbins author, entrepreneur and award-winning speaker, notes, "Success comes from taking the initiative and following up . . . persisting . . . eloquently expressing the depth of your love. What simple action could you take today to produce a new momentum towards success in your life?" So that is my challenge to all of you. Ultimately each one of us will define the success of this program. Take action today to produce new momentum toward success in the lives of your students. If you do this, answering the questions and criticism will be easy.

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