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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

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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."

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.

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-

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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



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.”