

volunteer



From Student to Educator: *KHS alumna returns as innovation administrator*

Keisha Seymour was probably destined to be a teacher.

The 2000 Kirkwood High School graduate, then Keisha Moody, entered the Kirkwood School District in kindergarten through the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. (VICC) program. She advanced well through Keysor Elementary, North Kirkwood Middle School and Kirkwood High School.

"One important thing I gained from attending the Kirkwood schools was the

ability to compete with my peers and build confidence, knowing that I could achieve my goals regardless of obstacles that may have presented themselves," said Seymour, who is now a director of Learning and Innovation in the Kirkwood district.

In Seymour's student days, the district's rigorous curriculum fit nicely with her appreciation of a good book and her penchant to play school on the weekends. "I think I would have been a great student regardless of the school setting," she said. "I believe that some of the opportunities afforded to me would have been more limited at the time" had she not participated in the VICC program.

Seymour found the biggest adjustment in attending a county school while living in the city was making sure to be "true to oneself in both settings," she said. "It's a unique opportunity to be exposed as a child to multiple cultural settings." Although there were unique experiences to both settings, her family didn't allow any differences to become problems. "It was our life."

In the beginning, the long bus ride was a challenge, but soon Seymour and her fellow riders figured out how to spend the time constructively. "Some days, students would study or get a head start on homework, have a peer tutoring session on a difficult concept from class, build a stronger connection with a friend, laugh and tell jokes, share snacks and stories, or get in a disco nap before or after school."

Seymour followed an older cousin into the Kirkwood district, and her two younger brothers and five cousins followed her. Of the nine family members, five continued through high school to graduate from KHS.

By the time Seymour graduated, she had participated in cheerleading, track and field, Peer Educators, student council, class office, mentoring, Black Achievement and Culture Club, choir, Pioneer yearbook and EcoAct Environmental Club. And she was homecoming queen in her senior year and volunteered with Big Brothers & Big Sisters.

She then earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology at the University of Missouri–Columbia. She taught in Chicago Public Schools for 10 years, while completing a master of education degree in curriculum and instruction from National-Louis University. She has studied school and counseling psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. Her future plans include earning a doctorate focusing on psychology and social justice in education.

Seymour then moved to Maryland and worked for KIPP DC, a network of high-performing, college-preparatory public schools in Washington DC, as a manager of reading and behavior intervention for the district's elementary schools.

After two and a half years in Maryland, in the summer of 2017, Seymour and her family decided to relocate back to St. Louis to be closer to family and grow their careers in a different path. "It was time to come home. I had not lived in St. Louis for over 17 years," she said.

She grabbed an opportunity to work at her alma mater in a multidimensional career that allows her to "work with amazing educators and learn alongside them to make Kirkwood School District a more exceptional district for students and educators." She writes curriculum for science and engineering subjects and is the liaison for fine



Keisha Seymour

The State of Integration in St. Louis

The St. Louis student transfer program was established to increase racial integration in metropolitan area public schools under a settlement agreement reached in the St. Louis desegregation case and approved by the federal court in 1983. This settlement agreement allows African-American students residing in the city of St. Louis to attend participating school districts in St. Louis County, provided certain eligibility requirements regarding residency and behavior records are met. The program also provides for non-African-American students who live in participating suburban school districts to transfer into a St. Louis magnet school in the city.

In 1999, a revised settlement agreement was reached among the various parties, transforming the federally supervised program into a voluntary program under the jurisdiction of the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC). Under this agreement, suburban school districts would continue accepting new transfer students and maintain certain targeted enrollment levels for at least a 10-year period ending in 2008-2009. Since that time, the program has been extended three times and, as a result, new students may continue to be enrolled through the 2023-2024 school year. Once enrolled, students are allowed

to continue their education in their chosen suburban district through graduation.

Since the inception of the program, over 70,000 students have participated, and many of the students currently enrolled are second-generation students with even a few third-generation students. In general, families in the city choosing to take advantage of the program recognize the benefits to them of enrolling their children in a suburban district. Similarly, suburban school districts also recognize the benefit of a more diverse student population to prepare their students for the future. With the nation and the St. Louis community becoming increasingly diverse, most families recognize this program as being mutually beneficial and a “win-win” opportunity for everyone involved. The program has a long track record of increasing the graduation rate, attendance rate and achievement levels of students involved in the program. Other key factors that have led to the success of the program include a fair reimbursement rate to participating school districts (currently \$7,000 per pupil), and the effective management of the transportation of the students by the VICC. Since the state aid payments simply follow the students from their district of residence to the VICC

program, there are no additional costs to Missouri taxpayers.

Currently about 4,500 students participate in the program, which is down from the peak participation of over 14,000 students in the 1999-2000 school year. Unfortunately, due to certain legal limitations on the indefinite continuation of a race-based school integration program, we have been gradually reducing the total number of students participating despite the mutual benefits for all students involved. This remains one of our biggest current challenges — how do we continue a program that has proven to be beneficial in light of the legal and financial challenges, given that racial segregation since the inception of the program has certainly not diminished and, in fact, has likely increased in many areas of metropolitan St. Louis? Our program has realized and demonstrated much success over the years as documented by empirical data as well as the many individual success stories of countless students. We need to work together as a community and a nation to identify opportunities to continue and expand upon the successes that our students have experienced.

From page 1

KHS alumna

and performing arts and the Social Emotional Learning coaches. She also coaches teachers and develops and presents professional development programs.

Seymour is a leader in the Kirkwood Teachers of Color (KTOC) group, which focuses on recruiting, mentoring, coaching, professional development and cultivating leadership opportunities. She is a co-chair of a KTOC subcommittee that is working on closing the opportunity gap for students of color in the district.

The job allows her to reconnect with several Kirkwood teachers who played important roles in her life as a student. “I have the pleasure of working closely with two women — Ramona Miller, a former mentor and Alpha Kappa Alpha member, and Roberta McWoods, another mentor and former track and field coach — who were advocates and kept me on track through school,” Seymour said. “There are multiple people I get to reconnect with as an adult, and it’s pure nostalgia and tons of fun.”

She also is a Kirkwood parent, with fourth grader Sian, second grader AJ and kindergartener Smith, all at Westchester Elementary.

Daughter Noa, age 3, is attending St. Paul Lutheran Preschool and is set to enter kindergarten at Kirkwood in 2020.

Seymour’s VICC experience laid the foundation for her later success in life and work. “I feel like a part of me persevering in life without fear was because I worked alongside my peers, competed with them from an early age, and gained a confidence that I could and would be as successful as the next person that I worked with in class regardless of what they looked like,” she said. “I learned at an early age that I would not allow a label to limit my achievements. I think there is an opportunity for students who are different to learn from one another and shatter stereotypes in a community. After living in Chicago and the Washington, DC area, I have been able to experience a beautiful celebration of diversity and hope to continue to spread that awareness and equality across St. Louis.”





Classroom to Career Pipeline: *St. Louis CAPS prepares students for careers in four industries*

STL CAPS students take a break from a busy neurology operating room during a rotation in the Medicine, Healthcare and Bioscience course.

The St. Louis CAPS program is starting its fourth full year of offering high school juniors and seniors intensive training in specialized careers. Several participating Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. schools take part in the program, officially known as St. Louis Centers for Advanced Professional Studies. St. Louis CAPS provides students the opportunity to fast-forward beyond college to test-drive their futures in high-skill, high-demand careers.

Aftton, Bayless, Lafayette (Rockwood School District), Mehlville and Oakville (Mehlville School District) schools have participated so far. This year, St. Louis CAPS welcomes students from seven additional high schools, including participating VICC schools Brentwood, Kirkwood, Webster Groves and the Collegiate School of Medicine & Bioscience, a St. Louis City magnet school.

St. Louis CAPS offers courses in Medicine, Healthcare and Bioscience; Global Business and Entrepreneurship; Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing; and Technology Solutions and Logistics.

In the past school year, three Aftton High School VICC students were immersed in the Medicine, Healthcare and Bioscience course and emerged ready to go on to college in pursuit of specialized nursing careers.

Jessica Pierre and Chiryame Robinson both entered the VICC program in the Aftton School District in kindergarten, and Malahja Smith joined them in second grade. All already had an interest in bioscience when they started hearing stories from older students about the CAPS program's medical course.

Jessica plans to be a neonatal nurse, Chiryame has her heart set on a career as a labor and delivery nurse, and Malahja is pursuing either emergency room or labor and delivery nursing. Malahja was named the 2018 Outstanding Graduating Senior in Aftton's VICC program.

All three students are confident they wouldn't have had the same opportunity outside the VICC program at Aftton. "I wouldn't have been exposed to the endless nursing possibilities without the CAPS program," Malahja said. "CAPS has helped me build my network and grow as a person. I'm really happy that I get to work alongside these professionals and see what it is like in the real world."

St. Louis CAPS students spend their entire senior year, five days a week, in half-day sessions hosted by business partners in

professional workplaces. During the first semester, students attend classes, visit workplaces and meet guest speakers and mentors as they advance their knowledge of their subject matter. They get hands-on experience and observe a wide spectrum of careers within the field.

The second semester is passion-based and interest-driven study, focusing on projects aligned to each student's career interests. The students have the opportunity to complete internships and job shadows with business partners.

"Our unique schedule frees us from traditional constraints, allowing us time for inquiry and project-based learning," said Travis Bracht, administrator of St. Louis CAPS and superintendent of Aftton School District, which started St. Louis CAPS. "Similarly, through regular in-class interactions with academic and business experts and field trips to their home institutions, students will begin their journey in becoming members of the local and broader business community."

Although most students enroll in the program for just the senior year, they may participate for both junior and senior years. Each course includes up to 30 to 40 students, divided into morning and afternoon classes. The Medicine, Healthcare and Bioscience course is hosted by St. Anthony's Medical Center. STL Venture Works South County, a small business incubator, hosts the Global Business and Entrepreneurship course and the Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing course while Oasis Digital hosts the Technology Solutions course.

Only students who are highly motivated, are serious about a career in their specialized field, and have a proven academic record may apply. Students may earn both high school and college credit. Data from St. Louis CAPS graduates shows that over 90 percent go directly to four-year colleges and participate in advanced placement classes. They typically have a grade point average above 3.0 and an average ACT score of 24.

CAPS follows five key guiding principles that unite, define and guide the CAPS experience:

Professional-based Learning: Instructors develop real-world, project-based learning strategies through collaboration with business and community partners. These interactions enhance the learning experience, preparing students for college and career.

Message from the CEO

I believe that most of us value diversity and appreciate the benefits of a diverse student body, a diverse work force and having diverse relationships in our personal life. So why is it so difficult to achieve this goal?



David S. Glaser

A recent business publication stated that “We’ve all been penalized at some point or other because of our gender, age, education pathway, race, physical appearance or other factors. But as leaders tasked with selecting the best of the best for high-performance positions, we want to believe we’re immune to exercising prejudice.” The reality is we are not immune and that is a serious concern that allows our unconscious biases to influence our decision-making. The article goes on to suggest a number of recommendations including anonymous randomized referencing to remove unconscious racial bias, a selection process that assesses only for competence, overcoming the halo effect by using selection panels from multiple sources, and recognizing that past performance is not the only predictor of future potential performance. Similarly, another business article mentioned that a good way to gauge an organization’s true commitment to diversity and inclusion is not listening to the messages the leaders trumpet but rather just counting the number of keynote speakers at events and conferences who come from a diverse background.

If these issues affect other organizations, it is important to recognize that we also are probably not immune to similar concerns. Many of our districts have worked and continue to work diligently to address such issues, but more work is needed. One of the articles in this issue of the Volunteer highlights Keisha Seymour, who is a graduate of the VICC program and now is an employee of the Kirkwood School District. As a leader in the Kirkwood Teachers of Color (KTOC) group, she helps the district focus on recruiting, mentoring, coaching and providing professional development and leadership opportunities for students and staff within the district. This a good start to address diversity needs.

The VICC program has realized much success over the years but we need to continue to work together as a community to expand upon the successes that our students and staff have already achieved. I challenge you to continue your efforts around diversity and inclusion in education. Will you accept this challenge?

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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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From page 3:

Classroom to Career Pipeline

Responsiveness: CAPS supports high-skill, high-demand careers through ongoing innovation in curriculum, development, programs and services based on local business and community needs.

Self-Discovery and Exploration: Students realize their strengths and passions by exploring potential professions. This helps them make informed decisions about their future and learn to exhibit leadership.

Professional Skills Development: Students cultivate transformative skills, such as understanding expectations, time management and other essential business values.

These skills are critical to providing students a competitive advantage in their post-secondary education and professional careers.

Entrepreneurial Mindset: Instructors create an environment that encourages creative thinking and problem solving. An innovative culture is key to fostering entrepreneurial learning and design thinking.

The CAPS program started in 2008 in the Blue Valley School District in Overland Park, Kansas, and the national network started in the 2015-16 school year. The national CAPS Network spans 12 states, 39 programs and 80-plus school districts.