

VICC volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program



VICC Counselors Serve as Valuable Resource for Schools

Their work with alternative education students compared to "case manager" job

By Peggy Magee

In a recent meeting between the VICC counselors and SCOPE alternative education director Pollie Richardson, standing, everyone agreed that their main focus is doing what is best for the students. "It's all about helping the kids be successful," notes Laverne Mitchom. In their job, the counselors build good relationships with alternative education students and their families, which is key to getting students back on track. The counselors are, from left, Vickie Williams, Mary Schafer Meehan, Jennifer Christy, Mildred Scott and Laverne Mitchom. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

When it comes to getting struggling VICC students back on track, the five counselors of the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation are like a life preserver for a flailing swimmer. They are rescue providers.

And not only do their services greatly benefit the recipients themselves, they are highly valued by the counselors and directors who work with alternative school students.

The VICC counselors have a broad range of responsibilities in their job of partnering with county schools. Chiefly, they work to ensure positive educational experiences for VICC pupils and their families, as well as for resident students, faculty and staff. Yet perhaps their most significant contribution is extending a rescue line to students in dire situations.

The VICC counselors "serve as a kind of case manager," explains Pollie Richardson, the director of an alternative program facility used by the eight area school districts that form

See inside **VICC Counselors**

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VICC Counselors

continued from page 1

WORKSHOPS

the South County Consortium. Typically students in this program (upwards of 200 at any given time) have been suspended or expelled from their traditional school (for reasons such as ongoing fighting, poor attendance, failing grades or involvement in drugs) or dropped out of school. They are referred to Richardson's program by the home school counselor and often have serious personal or family issues. Sometimes the student is pregnant; other times homeless.

There are similar alternative education programs affiliated with other St. Louis county districts. Regardless of which one it is, a VICC counselor -- responding to a call from either the alternative school or the transfer student's family -- arrives on the scene to help. Whether it's Jennifer Christy,

Mary Schafer Meehan, Laverne Mitchom, Mildred Scott or Vickie Williams depends on the student's last name.

"I have had a great history of working with the VICC counselors," notes Richardson, who started the program she heads up back in 1996. "I see some of them two to three times a week. When they are called, they come right away and help with whatever I need or the student needs." From that point on, regular follow-up visits between the counselor and student occur (depending on the circumstances, those can be once a week or every other month) with the counselors keeping the staff apprised as the situation warrants.

But that initial consult -- whether it's at the request of the home school or alternative setting -- usually involves the counselor having a heart-to-heart talk with the student and a discussion with their parents. In a "loving and empathetic" way, they talk to them about what needs to be done to correct the situation, notes VICC counselor Mildred Scott. "If it's an absenteeism issue, we discuss the importance of regular atten-

dance -- that it's absolutely necessary for success in the classroom," she explains. "We are upfront with parents and tell them they can be hotlined if it continues."

These kinds of honest and open relationships between the VICC counselors and the families they serve sometimes last for years as the counselor continues to monitor the student's success (even after they've returned to their home school) or helps with other siblings. "The VICC counselors often work with the same family for a long time and so there is a familiarity that exists, a connection," reports Mehlville High School junior counselor Amy Hughey, formerly with the Rockwood Individual Learning Center. In some cases, they make home visits (most usually accompanied by school staff) and provide emergency transportation or other types of personal assistance to the family as needed.

"Knowing the families as they do, they have more insight into their particular circumstances," Hughey adds. That relationship allows them to cut through the excuses and get students to genuinely commit to making changes. Kids can move forward by leaps and bounds when trust issues are in place."

The recently retired director of Parkway's alternative programs, Helen VanDerhyden, speaks highly of Mildred Scott, the counselor with whom she is most familiar. "Mildred develops such a great relationship with the students and gets to know their families. She helps me understand their issues." VanDerhyden remembers calling Scott with some concerns about one of her students. "Mildred came that very day to meet with her. She talked to the student first and then brought me in. She does a good job of encouraging and motivating."

Scott attributes the VICC counselors' rapport with students to the fact that they are not part of the school. Her colleague Mary Schafer Meehan agrees, noting that the kids tend to be open with the VICC counselors and feel comfortable venting about a teacher or what is going on at school. "By the time we are brought in, the kids are usually tired of dealing with school personnel and appreciate a fresh set of ears or a different perspective." And often the counselors can reach parents more effectively than the school, she

explains, "because they know we are the agency that oversees the program."

Scott, Meehan and the other counselors know all too well that when students are not happy in their home life, they take their frustrations out by acting up at school. "Whether their parents are doing their part or not, I tell my students, 'You are the chief investor in your education,'" reports Laverne Mitchom. "I inform them that life will be a lot harder without an education. But I assure them that they will get the support they need from both the school staff and from me." Meehan adds, "We give students the tools to rise above what is going on in their lives. We help them be successful regardless of the adversity they may face at home."

The VICC counselors' knowledge and experience with community resources also benefits the families they serve, notes Hughey. "Typically county school counselors don't have much knowledge of the city or the programs available." If a student needs to be directed to a tutoring site or a place of employment (in some alternative programs students have the option of working a half day), "a VICC counselor can say, 'I know right where you are and where you need to go.'"

Pollie Richardson reports that the VICC counselors also serve as advocates for their students. If there is a disciplinary hearing or any meeting about a student's future in the program, a VICC counselor will be present if asked. "The counselor works on the student's behalf."

Amy Hughey sums up the role of the VICC counselors: "They are a great group of ladies. They have a history with their families and bring a sense of consistency to the situation. Because of the connections they make with families, they are a very valuable resource. I am always happy to see a VICC counselor."

In many cases, the students thank the counselors for their involvement and tell them it has helped. Recently, Mildred Scott ran into a former Valley Park student who now attends Forest Park Community College. The student reported to Scott, "I wouldn't have graduated had it not been for you. You were my catalyst. You pushed me!"

All in a day's work for the counselors of the VICC.

VICC Counselors Also Offer Workshops for Schools

In addition to working individually with students on an as needed basis, the VICC counselors also offer a variety of workshops that schools can request.

Among the workshops are a training model for groups of girls, a workshop that focuses on the concerns and issues that face the African-American male student, a middle and high school transitional program, a workshop designed to improve race relations among middle and high school students, a strength based curriculum that helps overcome challenges with solutions that youth can understand and workshops for both students and parents on the achievement gap. They also offer a workshop designed to help school staff better understand their African-American transfer students.

Their workshops include

- **Conflict Mediation**
- **Bus Behavior**
- **Girls Within Reach**
- **Survival Kit for Young Men**
- **I Choose Success**
- **Enriching Race Relations through Education**
- **Why Try?**
- **Tests Matter: What You Learn Will Help You Earn**
- **For Parents: Tests Matter**
- **Understanding Your African-American Transfer Students**

All workshops are offered free of charge and can be scheduled by contacting Lisa Gray at the VICC, 314.721.8422, ext. 3015 or lgray@choicecorp.org. For more information on the workshops contact a counselor directly at 314.721.8422.

St. Louis Schools' Education Good Fit for County Youth

by Peggy Magee

A Washington University science research program provided St. Louis magnet school student Adam Mann-Ali with a structured summertime activity, insight into his future career path and a generous stipend which he is putting toward college.

For the Cleveland NJROTC Academy senior from Bridgeton, the Young Scientists Summer Focus was a fitting culmination of his educational years in the St. Louis school system which whetted his interest in science and then nurtured it through challenging instruction. It was at the urging of his AP chemistry teacher, Jenny Zhao, that Adam applied to the selective research internship. Zhao wrote one of the two letters of recommendation that accompanied his application, which also required a student essay, relevant work experience and an interview.

From an applicant pool of 75 students, 16 were chosen for the eight-week program held at the Washington University Medical Center. In their eight-hour workday, they conducted individual research projects (with the support of a mentor and tutor), read and interpreted scientific journals and participated in faculty led seminars examining topics in biomedical and clinical science.

The intensive program satisfied Adam's passion for science which he began developing in elementary school at Dewey International Studies. There he had a great teacher, he says, who gave students little hands-on projects for which they made scientific notes. "From an unknown, you'll always get a known," is what Adam says he finds so interesting about science. "There's always an answer. It's fun to get that answer." In his research project, he examined which specific peptides activate and bind T cells. At the end of the summer, he presented his findings at the Summer Focus Symposium.

When Adam transferred to Dewey after attending schools in his home district of Pattonville, he found the teaching style better suited to his educational needs. "I liked that students worked together and helped each another," he says, adding that it was often easier for him to grasp con-



Cleveland Naval ROTC senior Adam Mann-Ali, of Bridgeton, talks with his AP chemistry teacher from last year, Jenny Zhao, about his experience in the Young Scientists Summer Focus, offered by Washington University. Zhao, who recommended Adam for the program, thinks he is well suited for a career in science. "He is very determined and doesn't quit until he hits upon the right answer." Adam speaks highly of his education in the St. Louis school system. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

cepts explained by other students than the teacher.

From Dewey, he went on to Compton Drew Investigative Learning Center, drawn to its math and science emphasis. Later, he followed in the footsteps of his older sister whose education at Cleveland NJROTC Academy prepared her well to major in biology at Mizzou. "My sister loved high school. She had a great experience at Cleveland and the environment was good for her."

The same holds true for Adam, who ranks number one in the school (with many advanced placement classes under his belt) and whose involvements have included debate and armed drill team. He especially likes the battalion structure of his school and takes his position of administrative officer very seriously.

Adam looks forward to studying biology in college with hopes of becoming a forensic anthropologist. His recent summer internship reinforced his leanings toward a career in science and enlightened him about the job opportunities available. In addition to receiving a backpack, a flash drive, cups and pens, each of the students received a \$2500 stipend for participating.

"It was a wonderful experience," Adam reports.



VICC student Tarrence Clark, a stand-out at Webster Groves High School who now studies computer engineering at Mizzou, chats with his counselor, Karen Verstraete, who nominated him for the school's top award, which he won. The young achiever says he was fueled by the atmosphere in Webster schools. He especially appreciates Verstraete, "my strongest supporter." Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

Webster Student Earns Multiple College Scholarships

Still wishes he had pushed himself more

By Peggy Magee

At Webster Groves High School, VICC student Tarrence Clark was among the best and the brightest. He carried a 3.8 GPA with a schedule full of challenging classes. In his final year at Webster, when many seniors typically arrange a lighter work load for themselves, he took all honors or advanced placement classes.

That's the same year the varsity Statesmen football team clinched the state championship with Tarrence playing at left guard and serving as captain. Also at Webster, he played percussion in the marching band and did a good amount of volunteer work. He was the recipient of the coveted Eagle Award, the top award given to a senior from the staff.

As a result of his success in and out of the classroom, Tarrence shined as a Mizzou applicant and was one of only 30 students to receive a George C. Brooks scholarship (a renewable, partial tuition award) from among the nearly 280 who applied. In addition, he received a total of \$5000 from the Parent Club and Latta Scholarship Foundation of Webster Groves High School, which were one-time stipends. And yet the freshman computer engineering major reflects on

his academic record and notes, "I could have done more. I wish I had."

He explains that good grades in advanced classes can translate into college credits (he entered Mizzou with 11), thereby making the cost of college less expensive and saving the family money. His hindsight observations should be food for thought for all students – that their effort can almost always be bumped up a notch, even if it's already pretty great.

From the time Tarrence entered first grade, he always felt part of the Webster Groves community despite the distance – both geographic and cultural – between school and his home, in the Union/Delmar area of St. Louis city. The only child of Corneisha Williams, the 18-year-old lost his father at the age of five and now wears a tattoo on his left upper arm in his honor. He describes the Webster school environment as "very supportive," adding, "it made me feel at home." He says he took to its atmosphere of academic excellence and leadership, pointing out, "it wasn't just one person but a bunch of people who set that tone: students, teachers, counselors, principals."

Tarrence clearly thrived in that environment, applying his strong work ethic and respectful demeanor and putting forth his best effort. "He was always focused and determined," notes his mother. "His education was important to him, so he was motivated to do well in school."

His college counselor, Karen Verstraete, recommended him for the Eagle award and he was selected from among six nominees. In her nomination essay, which she read to faculty and staff, she wrote, "Tarrence Clark is by far one of the most exceptional students I've had the pleasure of knowing during my 15 years in education."

The young collegiate speaks highly of his counselor as well. "Mrs. Verstraete made me aware of different programs and opportunities. Every time I needed her, she was there for me. She would always stop what she was doing to help."

Tarrence takes what he calls a "common sense" approach when it comes to his education. "I want to do the best I can and get the most from it so that when I enter the workforce, I'll be that much closer to being successful." He advises other VICC students to take full advantage of all the great opportunities available in their schools. "If you look at the big picture of where you want to be in 10 years, it only makes sense to make the most of high school."

volunteer

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



In my current role, and as a former chief financial officer, financial issues are and have been an important component of my job responsibilities. Currently and for the last several years, there has been more volatility and uncertainty in this area than I have experienced at any time during the past twenty years of my career in public education. In addition, unfortunately, it seems that every time I attend a meeting and we are updated on financial issues, there is more discouraging news.

School districts which are heavily dependent upon local property taxes have recently endured declines in residential property values only now to be confronted with anticipated new declines in commercial values leading to potentially lower property tax revenues. On the other hand, educational organizations such as VICC which are more dependent upon state revenues have seen declining payments through the school funding formula and reduced sales tax revenues. This occurs as residents cut back on their purchases and experience lower earnings due to the stubbornly high state and national unemployment rates. Finally, the significant turnover in the make-up of the state legislature resulting from term limits and various ongoing legal challenges in the court system add to the uncertainty regarding what we can expect and plan for.

All of this volatility and uncertainty makes day- to-day planning a challenge and long range planning for five years or more almost impossible. In this uncertain and volatile environment, it becomes even more important for us as the educational leaders to maintain certainty and consistency for our students. Fortunately, all of the educators that I know and that I work with are committed to this goal – that students can enter our classrooms and schools and do so confidently knowing that they will be provided a quality education by caring staff members. Our participating schools are safe, clean, and well maintained and staffed by teachers and administrators committed to doing everything it takes to enable all students to be successful in a challenging and ever changing world environment. Students attend our districts knowing that once they've been admitted into a district they will be given the necessary resources to successfully graduate from high school and even continue beyond to further educational opportunities.

We know the participating districts will continue to admit new students at least through 2013-2014 and we are considering an extension beyond that time. Clearly it is our duty and responsibility to create a safe, caring, and nurturing environment in this ever changing and sometimes turbulent world in which we are living. We are the constant force that they can depend upon and we must be there for them and never let them down.

This issue of the Volunteer features an article on the VICC counselors and the services that they provide to individual students, including those who have moved to alternative education settings. The workshops that our counselors offer to students, educators and parents are also included in a separate short story. I encourage you to look at these programs and call to schedule a workshop that would help your school. We also feature stories on two different transfer students -- one who transferred to the Webster Groves School District, flourished there and is now shining at Mizzou and the other student who transferred from a suburban school district and found his niche at a St. Louis Magnet School and has benefitted from community programs available to city students. I hope you enjoy this issue of the Volunteer.

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