

volunteer

Area Students Work On Becoming Leaders in Fostering an Inclusive Community

About 400 students of diverse backgrounds have learned about justice and equity issues, visited schools across town from them and engaged in honest conversations. They have explored their own biases and challenged their thinking and feelings.

They are part of a movement, called Gateway2Change, which has swept across St. Louis area high schools in the last couple years. Participants have listened to speakers, watched educational videos and stepped outside their comfort zones to meet other teens and find out about their lifestyles. Working in partnerships, they have implemented many varied projects for the betterment of St. Louis.

These youths have dug deep within the core of who they are and developed bolder, more empathetic versions of themselves. Why? They want to be examples for others in fostering an inclusive community and serve as change agents in their schools and neighborhoods.

Gateway2Change (G2C), which was launched after the tragic events of Ferguson, is an initiative of EducationPlus, a local, non-profit education resource for student success. Drew Schwartz, the movement's founder and organizer, met with area educators late in 2014 to enlist their support in engaging students to help the St. Louis community heal and thrive. "We saw a need for students to have an outlet, to have their voices heard," he explains. "Instead of just passively watching negative images, we wanted them to have a means to get involved, to show their tenacity." Many schools saw this as a wonderful opportunity and jumped on board. Since then, others have joined the movement and, to date, nearly 35 schools are involved. The program is open to all St. Louis metro area high schools.

Schwartz, a 1997 graduate of Parkway Central High, credits the

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Drew Schwartz
founder, organizer
Gateway2Change

Parkway South High School student Jayden Jackson, standing at right, says that being involved in the Gateway2Change movement "has broadened my horizons." Here, he and his schoolmates listen to a teen from Parkway's sibling school, the city's Soldan International Studies High School, talk about her home and school life.



VICC program for his interest in bridging cultures and communities. A student from Chesterfield, he befriended several of his classmates who participated in VICC. "We would hang out together, either at my house or in the city," he points out, adding that those experiences--which affected him in positive ways--were "the origin of the work I am doing now."

Typically, each school has 10 to 12 student representatives and one or more faculty members who serve as sponsors. Highlights of the program include student summits on race (seven held to date), visits between paired up schools (called sibling school partnerships), and change agent projects by the sibling schools.

Projects have included anti-bullying/self-esteem building programs, community clean-up and restoration efforts, school supply drives for low income schools and other types of volunteerism. An activity involving the larger group of G2C students was talking to baseball fans outside Busch Stadium where they handed out bracelets made of seeds as a conversation starter and encouraged them to "plant positivity" by being nice to someone else. Students documented all their projects with pictures and videos that they posted on social media as an inspiration to others.

Central to the movement is the power of young people. It is they who steer its direction. At the first summit in January of 2015, Drew Schwartz stood on the stage of Brentwood High School and gave this challenge to the 100 student leaders from 14 high schools: "Let's flip the script, let's hear from YOU, let's hear solutions from YOU." Much like at a rally, the kids clapped their hands enthusiastically and shouted out in support of his suggestion. Then they settled back and listened to Dr. Charles Pearson, Superintendent of Normandy Schools Collaborative, who informed them about race theory and advised them on dialogue, problem identification and taking action. This first summit was where the students voted to form sibling school partnerships, the foundation from which future ideas took shape.

Nine months later, at the fifth summit, Schwartz reminded the students in attendance, now numbering 330, of their important role: "How many of you are ready to actually change images, change energy, change the whole idea of what St. Louis can be? "This summit's theme was "Activating Hope" and students conducted interviews back in their schools and neighborhoods to increase their understanding of differing perspectives on race and relationships for the purpose of identifying problems and working toward solutions.

Carl Hudson, assistant principal at Rockwood's Marquette High School, remembers that the topic of the Delmar Divide, explored at the inaugural summit and again at the orientation summit the following school year, was especially enlightening to his students. "It was eye opening for them," he says about the video that was shown, produced by BBC News, that reports on the socio-economic

differences that exist between neighborhoods north of Delmar and those south. Hudson points out that by being involved in G2C, his students (some recruited from the Academic and Cultural Club; others recommended by the principal) gain a level of knowledge and confidence that empowers them to make a difference in their schools and communities. "It is our hope that they take what they have learned and share those ideas with the greater student body."

One way that the Marquette students have done that is through their "find a homie" challenge, the project they conceived with their sibling school, Jennings High School. It encourages schoolmates to take pictures of themselves with other students whom they do not know at all and then post them on Instagram or Twitter. "The idea is to make connections with students who you wouldn't ordinarily talk to and hopefully get to know them better," explains student Kearstyn Richardson, a VICC participant. It was also designed to spread the word about G2C and to encourage other students to become involved, she said. "So often we only associate with people in our own little bubbles, such as sports or theatre. This forced us to move outside our bubbles and, in doing so, break down barriers and stereotypes."

"It helps students focus their lenses to see inequity and to be moved enough to want to do something about it."

Eve Diel
librarian
Parkway North High School
about Gateway2Change

Students from Rockwood's Eureka High School have also been heavily involved in the G2C movement. Two of them were part of a small group of students and adults who traveled to Washington, D.C. last September to make a presentation on G2C at the National Conference on School Diversity. Accompanying the student leaders, in addition to Drew Schwartz, was VICC Chief Executive Officer David Glaser, who was instrumental in arranging the presentation at the conference. "The G2C initiative aligns perfectly with the mission of VICC," he notes, adding that enlightening those in other parts of the country about G2C is important. Already the Rochester (NY) City School District has started its own version of G2C.

High school librarian Eve Diel, one of the G2C sponsors at Parkway North, believes the movement is a great leadership development program because it requires students to think for themselves, lets them know they have a voice and educates them

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Becoming Leaders*

City Manager's Leadership Influenced

by Former Mehlville Administrators

In 1984, when Abdul-Kaba Abdullah entered the Mehlville district as a first grader, he and his parents had no idea of what awaited him at the end of the one-hour bus ride from his home in the Walnut Park area of St. Louis. This was just the second year of Mehlville's participation in the voluntary transfer program so everything was new and untested. What they found--beginning in elementary school and continuing through to high school--were administrators who made it their priority to provide access and equity to those students who left the familiarity of their neighborhood schools and traveled great distances for educational opportunities.

Sure, there were challenging moments along the way, but Abdullah always felt nurtured and supported by his schools' leaders. He rattles off past principals, other administrators and a former football coach (names the 38-year-old remembers from decades ago!), citing their unique qualities and telling how he and the rest of the school community were positively impacted by their leadership.

He reminisces about Gary Heyde, his high school football coach, noting, "He was an advocate for kids and an advocate for education. I would not be who I am without him." About his middle school principal Jack Jordan, he says, "He gave me every opportunity to succeed."

Those individuals who set the tone for their schools hold a special place in his heart, he says. As a working professional, his decisions have been guided by the same principals of fairness and justice to which they held tight. In his current job as city manager for the City of Berkeley, as well as in his prior positions dealing with affordable housing, community development, and training and employment (all in St. Louis), he has strived to shape the implementation of policy "so that it represents the voice of the unheard as well as the voice of the heard," he points out. "It's important to protect the interests of the underrepresented and to not disenfranchise any group of people."

Beyond seeing firsthand the power of effective leadership, Abdullah cites other benefits of attending Mehlville schools. "I was able to interact with people of other cultures and see how they live." The 1997 Mehlville High grad recollects details of his academic life--his love of social studies and science, his exposure to classical music, the cultural awareness he gained through the study of a foreign language--and connects them directly to the person he has become. "There were so many opportunities to learn and grow and so many outlets to express ourselves," he says.

Playing on the Mehlville football team (running back) also expanded what Abdullah refers to as his "circle of learning." He traveled to other parts of the state for tournaments, attended football camps on college campuses and met with college coaches

who visited Mehlville on recruiting trips. "I found out what college life was like and what universities can offer from a career and lifestyle standpoint."

Abdullah credits Mehlville with helping him discover his interests, shape his values and learn what he wanted out of life. He grew up loving to travel, appreciating the arts and possessing a strong global perspective. His young children have already traveled to two foreign countries. He wants them to grow up as he did, with diverse interests and a thirst for expanding their horizons.

After graduation, Abdullah attended Northwest Missouri State where he majored in geography, minored in public administration and played football for the Bear Cats. He went on to acquire two management related master's degrees and intern for a congressman in Washington, D.C. In his short life, he has achieved a great deal and had a wide range of gratifying experiences--both professionally and personally. A proud resident of St. Louis, he and his wife and children live just blocks away from where he grew up. He is active in the community and works hard to make St. Louis a safe and thriving place to live.

Abdullah describes the opportunity to attend Mehlville as "the most important decision my parents ever made." He still keeps in touch with some of his classmates, regularly attends class reunions and makes himself available for any mentorship opportunities of current students in the VICC program. He says that Mehlville "altered my life because it put me on a course to succeed." And for that, he says, he will be forever grateful.



Abdul-Kaba Abdullah, a 1997 graduate of Mehlville High, models his leadership style after the administrators he had in Mehlville schools who made it their priority to provide access and equity to all. He currently serves as city manager for the City of Berkeley.

Message from the CEO



David S. Glaser

As my 60th birthday approaches next year, life has begun to take on new meaning and purpose. Even more than in the past, I am recognizing the importance of making each day count and living every day to the fullest because tomorrow is not promised. I now begin each day with a positive attitude and say, “Well, I woke up this morning so it is going to be a great day.” Similarly, I would encourage everyone to understand and focus on what you are meant to do today and embrace every opportunity that each day presents. It also causes me to wonder what the day might be like if I did not wake up? That probably is difficult to imagine and even more difficult to think about. But every one of us has today and that gives us an opportunity to positively impact the students for which we have responsibilities. As the articles in this issue of the *Volunteer* reinforce and testify, the positive beliefs and expectations that we have for our students does make a difference. In addition, a recent article in *Education Week* focused upon how a “growth mindset”—the belief that academic skills and strengths can be developed through effort and practice—leads to higher academic achievement. Encouraging students to believe they have the ability to grow academically and that having grit and persistence can lead to greater academic success are positive messages that each of us has the opportunity every day to pass on. Now there is compelling research that passing along such beliefs can help students tackle difficult problems and ultimately be more successful in school and in life. Let’s make each day count and be positive “encouragers” of all of our students!

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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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about the importance of social justice. “It helps students focus their lenses to see inequity and to be moved enough to want to do something about it.”

Parkway North had two sibling schools: Affton High and McCluer. By visiting each other’s schools, the students took note of the commonalities and differences. Their change agent project was to study the education-related findings of the Ferguson Commission Report (such as graduation rates, school suspensions, MAP scores, college enrollment) and use that information as a basis to compare data from their individual schools. Their intent was to report to the commission and to their school boards the disparities they found and communicate their feelings of frustration in hopes of creating change. “Through our own research, we can confirm that the disparities referenced in the commission report exist,” notes Parkway North student and VICC

participant Ria Smith. “We want to make that known, using our own schools as examples, so that solutions can be found.”

A joint activity that Parkway South students had with their sibling school, the city’s Soldan International Studies High School, was touring the area referenced in the Delmar Divide video and discussing it. On another outing together, they visited a soup kitchen/food pantry at a church near Soldan where they volunteered and talked with the homeless patrons.

After spending time with students from Soldan, Parkway South VICC participant Jayden Jackson concludes, “Regardless of what part of town we come from, we are more similar than you might think.” A sophomore, he plans to continue his involvement in G2C because he’s interested in race relations, especially in light of recent events, and welcomes the exchange of viewpoints that are at its core. “It’s important to hear all sides,” he notes.