



Thurgood Marshall Academy eNEWS UPDATE

June 2008

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Dear Friend of Thurgood Marshall Academy:

Thurgood Marshall Academy was recently featured in several national news organizations' coverage of quality education.

Print Media:

On Tuesday, June 10, *The Wall Street Journal* published a profile of the school by Gary Fields entitled, "Learning (and Succeeding) on Jump Street: In Washington D.C., a School in a Tough Neighborhood Demands Much and Gets Much From Students." The article aptly describes our intense focus on preparing students to succeed in college, which has led to every graduate achieving acceptance to college. Mr. Fields illustrates our work through interviews with senior Christian Yanez and junior Elisabeth Robinson.

Learning (and Succeeding) on Jump Street In Washington D.C., a School in a Tough Neighborhood Demands Much and Gets Much From Students

By GARY FIELDS
June 10, 2008; Page A12

WASHINGTON -- As a middle-school student in Ward 8, one of the tougher areas of the nation's capital, Elisabeth Robinson did badly at school on purpose to keep out of fights. "Anything you do could get you jumped -- could get you shot up," she said. Her solution was "to dumb down who I was."

Now, the high-school junior is facing a different kind of peer pressure at Thurgood Marshall Academy. In a neighborhood that produces about 30% of the city's homicide victims, with the city's lowest high-school graduation rate, every member of the school's first four classes has gone on to college. No one wants to be the first to fail.

"College is an expectation here, not a choice," Ms. Robinson says.

The seven-year-old charter school, named for the first African-American Supreme Court justice, is one of several programs east of the Anacostia River that are designed to break the pattern of violence in this impoverished section of the city. TMA -- as it is known -- has innovative programs, such as the self-assessments that students must do, as well as software that gives teachers a near-instantaneous look at students' learning. But the school's success isn't built on cutting-edge pedagogy but on an old-fashioned concept: high expectations.

From the uniforms the students are required to wear to the lack of a metal detector to the college banners that hang from the walls, the atmosphere is built around expecting the students to adhere to the rules and do well. The hours-long classes, extracurricular activities and vigorous evaluations simply support those expectations.

There is also another powerful force: the incentive to do well when the alternative couldn't be clearer in crumbling and crime-ridden neighborhoods.

"Education is seen as liberation," says John Diamond, associate professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. That, combined with committed teachers, involved parents and wide-ranging activities that extend the school day, creates successes at TMA, he says.

As a result, TMA scores third-highest in tests of all city high schools with open enrollments. It may also show a potential solution for cities across America that face a rise in violent crime. Recently in Washington, seven people were killed in one nine-hour stretch, a dramatic crime spree after years

of declining murder rates.

"Let's face it, most people, whether valid or not, operate on the assumption that if you come from a publicly subsidized housing project or any of the low-income neighborhoods, you're more likely than not to end up in the not-so-successful columns," says Albert Herring, executive assistant U.S. attorney for external affairs in the District of Columbia. What TMA shows is that "intellectual limits should not be placed on the students because of their ZIP Codes."

In Ward 8, the neighborhood outside Thurgood Marshall is bustling. Several young men loiter on a nearby sidewalk. A two-door sedan makes a U-turn and pulls to a stop nearby and the motorist starts cursing the group.

Although any student in the city can apply to the public charter school, 93% of the 365 students at the school come from Wards 7 and 8, where residents have an average per-capita annual income of about \$14,000, the lowest in the city, according to a study conducted for the D.C. Office of Planning/State Data Center. Seventy percent of the students during the school year 2006-2007 qualified for free or reduced-cost lunches.

There is no metal detector, atypical for most schools and government buildings in Washington. The students, both the boys and the girls, dress in tan slacks and white or maroon shirts with the school name on them. They move quietly from class to class beneath triangular college banners that fill the halls. "No brainer" signs, reminders of the code of behavior, are placed intermittently in the halls as well. No eating outside the cafeteria, no grooming in class, no profanity, no gum chewing.

Everything at TMA is geared toward college, from the banners, to university prospectuses found in many rooms to lessons that walk students through the application process. Students in all grades participate in college-prep classes and activities.

In physics, students look on intently as a teacher uses a door knob to explain the principle of torque and rotational forces. One classmate explains energy and acceleration using the flight of a football.

Thursday is graduation. As the day approaches, students prepare their portfolios -- self-assessments that track their academic performance and personal behavior. They must stand before faculty, staff, parents, fellow students and administrators and make their formal presentations about how they did in class and progressed socially. The skills required are the same that they will use later in college and job interviews.

Executive Director Joshua Kern founded TMA in 2002 while attending Georgetown University Law School. At the time, he says, he was teaching at a nearby high school and concluded it was impossible to ask students to learn in a violent environment where they lacked educational materials, like books.

Today, attendance is about 95% and more than one-third of the students have perfect attendance for the school year. After passing a round of interviews, incoming students spend five weeks at the school the summer before they enter. Classes run from 8:45 a.m. until 3:40 p.m., with some variations, and with tutoring and after-school work the day usually extends to 6 p.m.

"I think the school takes over our lives," says Christian Yanez, 17 years old, one of the students graduating this week, as he explains the school's success. "We don't have time to do the things that could lead to negative activities," he adds. "There are all kinds of extracurricular activities for the kids who don't like to go home after school."

Admission isn't based on academic criteria. Many of the students have to take remedial instruction, but they have ample opportunity to get up to speed, Mr. Kern says. The school has an assessment system, through tests that are administered regularly, which gives teachers an immediate look at whether students understand the lessons.

The school also has an alumni coordinator who keeps track of graduates, making sure they are aware of financial aid and other funding that can make college more of a possibility. Parents who need help with their taxes can come to the school for sessions that include local accountants. "Our kids can't get financial aid unless their parents file taxes," Mr. Kern says.

Ms. Robinson, the 16-year-old junior, is the second member of her family to graduate from the school. Her brother was in the first class and is now in college majoring in computer programming. She wants to attend Harvard Law. "I know I want to think about sociology undergraduate, to help others," she says.

Her day here begins at 7:45 a.m., about an hour before school opens. She comes to get extra work in on her classes. She leaves about 6 p.m. every day. In addition to the classes, she participates in a program put on by the Anti-Defamation League, as well as the band and drama clubs. She works evenings at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center and she visits schools, churches and recreation centers talking to other young people about teen-dating violence.

When she was preparing to choose a high school, her mother looked at schools in the area and they seemed troubled. Altercations began with little provocation. "If you wore something somebody didn't like, you could end up fighting," Ms. Robinson says. The final straw was when her brother, then in junior high, came home, having been beaten up by students from one of the local schools.

Now, although sirens and ambulances are commonplace in her neighborhood, as are assaults and shootings, she can be herself at school and no longer hide her achievements and aspirations, she says. "Here, college is not even a question."

Write to Gary Fields at gary.fields@wsj.com

TV and Radio Media:

The school was also honored by radio and television coverage the same week. On Wednesday, June 23, Glenn Beck featured our work during his "Real Story" segment on CNN, as did Lou Dobbs's radio show. Both programs recognized Thurgood Marshall Academy as a success story in the education world.

To hear Josh Kern's appearance on the Lou Dobbs show click here (roughly 40 min. into the 3rd hour): http://loudobbsradio.com/audio/fullshow/061808/Lou_061808_Hour3.mp3

Unfortunately, there is no link available to the Glenn Beck interview.

This much-deserved attention to Thurgood Marshall Academy's high standards and success in preparing students for college and civic participation is a testament to the hard work of our students and their families, the dedication of our faculty and staff, and the long-term investment made by our volunteers and funders!

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE:

www.thurgoodmarshallacademy.org.