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Gary Malerba / Special to The Detroit News

University Preparatory student Shannon Junior, 18, shares his senior thesis on male mentoring with administrator Theresa Henderson Jackson.

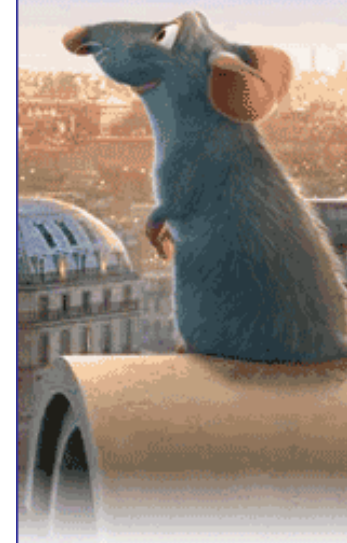
Changing Michigan's schools

Urban school succeeds by teaching right values

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University Preparatory Academy school in Detroit's midtown, a sign adamantly exclaims:

"NO VICTIMS!"

The message reflects the teachers' mission: to let not one student fail high school. But it's also a political message of sorts. Unlike most high schools, University Prep, a charter public school, does not back away from teaching values to its students.

"No Victims" has multidimensional messages. Teachers make it clear to their students that they're expected to succeed and live the American Dream with a good-paying job -- not be a victim to globalization, ghetto streets, abandonment by parents or anything else.

Indeed, the school's approach demonstrates the power of culture upon student achievement.

The sign in its teachers' conference room might as well say, "Culture matters."

Naysayers predicted the school would fail when it opened in 2000. This week, the school is proving them wrong by showing its first significant results. It will graduate 95 percent of its first class on Saturday.

What distinguishes University Prep, built by philanthropist Bob Thompson, from other schools is its conscious focus on identity and reprogramming students' potential negative belief systems.

In suburban schools, the academy's founders argue, students learn how to operate in mainstream culture through their day-to-day lives. They learn how to present themselves in social settings, how to talk to potential employers and other "soft" skills.

Even more important, their parents, neighbors, teachers and society expect middle- and upper-class children to succeed in college and the work world. Thus, those children learn to believe in their capabilities and potential.

For working-class and low-income children, that assumption can't be made. They get messages from society that they're not "college material," so they're more likely to doubt their abilities. First-generation college-goers, in particular, may have psychological barriers to transcend. University Prep's founders set out to change those dynamics. At the state and federal levels, values are "hard to legislate," says Doug Ross, a founder and superintendent of the academy.



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"But at the school level, it's easy to do. The successful urban schools in America do it."

Identity building is part of the school's regular activities. Each graduating class has its own slogan to reinforce the positive nature of college-going, which the school defines not only as a four-year college but also technical training and skilled trades.

The school's hallmark is its focus on relationships. Every child is assigned to what's called an advisory group of about 15 students and one teacher with whom they take classes for four years. Such "advisories" function similarly to a support group; students provide positive peer pressure and encouragement. And every student is required to apply to college. The combined strategies are designed to boost self-confidence and provide a safe, supportive environment. That's crucial for teens who lack a stable home life.

"When you ask kids where they live or who they live with, they say, 'I stay here,' which is such a reflection of the high rates of transience," says Margaret Trimmer-Hartley, an incoming superintendent for the academy's new math and science middle school. "Their advisory groups become their community, their family."

The approach is working. The entire University Prep class of 2007 has been accepted to post-secondary institutions -- which would be considered a minor miracle in many general admission urban high schools.

While many educators say schools cannot make up for the culture of low expectations in cities -- or family instability -- University Prep is demonstrating that, in fact, the right mix of education strategies can fill the voids in the lives of many urban students.

Second in a series.

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