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Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

University Prep High School classmates Brittany Canty, 18, and Monique Gayles, 17, celebrate after getting their pins signifying what they have accomplished in their senior year.

Editorial: Changing Michigan's schools

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University Prep shows how to prevent dropouts

The Detroit News

Successful methods for cutting high school dropout rates are no longer a mystery. Detroit's University Prep Academy provides a model for urban schools throughout the state.

University Prep is a charter public school whose leaders have tested and sweated over every detail since promising to graduate 90 percent of its students -- and send 90 percent of them to college -- when it opened in 2000. This Saturday, the academy will keep its promise. At least 90 percent of its first class will celebrate graduation. The school is making its mark in effectively tackling the state's dismal urban high school dropout rate. Academy leaders acknowledge that they still have a lot to learn about bringing up their students' academic achievement rate to match those of the state's wealthiest school districts, such as Bloomfield Hills or Grosse Pointe. Where the school is making its mark, however, is in effectively tackling the state's dismal urban high school dropout rate.

On that front, University Prep's success is dramatic when compared with its peers. Detroit's graduation rate, for example, is 42 percent, according to the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research's well-respected 2006 study. Another study sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation last year found that rate to be 21.7 percent.

Educators with the Detroit school system and in general often deflect such criticism by arguing students' families don't prepare them to succeed in school. The academy shows that that's no excuse.

In fact, University Prep is relatively similar to Detroit's general admission high schools. About 67 percent of academy students and 80 percent of Detroit system students are eligible for free

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or reduced-cost lunch.

Unlike elite Detroit public schools such as the Bates Academy, University Prep does not require its students to meet certain academic standards to attend the school. Admissions are based on a random lottery.

Nor does the academy offer its teachers dramatically higher pay, which some argue results in better teachers and thus, better results. The academy's average high school teacher salary is \$55,000 -- quite comparable with Michigan's public school teacher average of about \$56,000.

What differentiates University Prep is its design to meet urban teenagers' particular needs. Teachers use an individualized instruction model for every student to ensure each one is challenged appropriately.

This is key to preventing dropouts; studies show that boredom fuels failure.

The academy also helps students find their passion -- whether it's becoming a veterinarian or an auto mechanic -- to spur their motivation. Students intern with people doing those jobs.

"These things are not rocket science," says Doug Ross, University Prep's superintendent.

"(The Detroit school system) is full of education Ph.D.s who know this stuff a lot better than I do. I'm essentially an ex-politician. If I can do this, then they can do this."

Urban schools across the state can start tackling their dropout rates by adopting University Prep's strategies. Urban parents and students deserve to see their educators learn what they can from University Prep's experiment. Otherwise, families may be left to believe their public school systems don't take seriously their students' potential for success.

Schools should act promptly before more teenagers drop out and are left to a bleak future.

Third in a series.

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