County Education Helps Groom Students for Leadership Positions in Government

by Peggy Waggoner

The newly-elected Republican chairman of St. Charles County, Eugene Dokes, believes the skills and insight he gained from his school experiences have shaped his leadership style. The same holds true for two other former voluntary transfer students now serving in the Missouri House of Representatives: Democrats Tishaura Jones and Clement Smith of the city’s 71st and 63rd districts, respectively.

Eugene Dokes’ Interests/Outlook

Dokes, 28, traces his interest in government back to the speech and debate team at Pattonville High School when he had the formidable task of researching the Cold War in preparation for a debate about U.S./Russia relations. “I realized that a big, vast world existed out there and I wanted to know more about it,” says the 2000 graduate of Pattonville High School. His involvement in the debate club also introduced him to public speaking and gave him the confidence to talk in front of an audience. One key lesson he says he learned: “Think before you speak.” It’s a skill he has mastered ever-changing society,” my outlook and experience of attending Pattonville broadened my instincts and strong convictions, determined to make my community a better place for all. The experience of attending Pattonville broadened my outlook and perspectives, preparing me for my own course and ever-changing society,” he says.

Tishaura Jones Cites High Expectations in Affton

Jones, 39, who holds the leadership position of Assistant Minority Floor Leader, gives rave reviews about the Affton school district. “I remember that fifth-grade teacher Ms. Winkler set a higher bar and I had to work really hard to reach it.” Those practices were helpful to her in middle school at Mackernate (now Rogers) when she was named “student of the month.” At Affton High, she remembers, “All of my teachers expected a lot from me.” And Jones responded positively to that, earning above average grades while participating in many extracurriculars.

Clem Smith Stresses Importance of Exposure which he Received in Clayton

Smith, 34, compares the neighborhood he grew up in — next to a housing project near Delmar and Union — to what he encountered in Clayton schools, as “the difference between night and day.”

Starting at Clayton in kindergarten, he reports, “It was my first experience being around children who were not black.” However the plusses of attending school in Clayton far outweighed the strain of being in the district minority. His classmates and their families were very welcoming and the exposure he gained was invaluable. “My friends had parents who were doctors and lawyers. I saw the possibilities.” He describes the Clayton district as a kind of “melting pot,” with students of many different cultures represented. “That was a good thing — having to learn to respect differences and get along,” he says. As a result, he appreciates that education he received in Clayton. “My workload seemed heavier than that of my neighborhood friends and they weren’t really familiar with advanced placement or college credit courses.” They didn’t talk much about college either, while Smith says, “College was just a natural thought for me because 98 percent of Clayton students go on to college.”

He started out at Southern Arkansas University but found it was not a good fit, so he returned to St. Louis and landed an assembly line job at Chrysler in Fenton, where he spent the next 13 years, his final ones as an inspector. While working full-time, he completed his degree at Columbia College-St. Louis. He also became a union official at Chrysler. “I was good at talking to both black and white employees because my education in Clayton provided me with that experience,” he says. Smith moved to The Boeing Co. about two years ago where he works when he is not performing his legislative duties.

Last January, he entered the State House and was appointed Deputy Minority Whip, another role for which he is well suited. “I work on getting everyone on the same page,” he explains. “Being accepting and open-minded toward all people, a skill I developed in Clayton, has served me well,” he notes.

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This past summer, while attending a policy briefing conference in Washington, D.C., Missouri state representatives Tishaura Jones and Clem Smith were invited to a reception at the White House where they met President Obama, a highlight of their political careers. Both legislators are former voluntary transfer students and credit their county school education with helping them acquire their leadership qualities.
The faculty at Rockwood's Marquette High School didn't just throw away a student who had fallen off track. They formed a complete turn-around for the teen who had gotten caught up in the negative influences of his Walnut Park neighborhood, one of the most crime-ridden in all of Walnut Park neighborhood, one in a complete turn-around for make his parents proud, resulted in a lot of trouble, committing reports. And he saw firsthand, his apathy and misbehavior as a means of survival,” so, according to D’Autrail, “I didn’t care about school,” is the first among his six siblings athletic (track) scholarships. He talked about the grade point average. He not only rallied, earning a 3.6 grade point averages, though earned a 25 on the ACT, that how much they wanted him for him to demonstrate how much they wanted him kilograms. He tracked his grades and behavior, making sure he stayed on course. Close connections were formed. D’Autrail is a talented athlete and Kami attended track meets and football games. “I wanted him to realize that people were invested in him and noticed his potential and wanted more for him,” she explains. But she warned him that it was up to him to change. Amid Meals also believed there was something special about D’Autrail. “Unfortunately, he had gotten good at negative behavior as a means of survival,” she points out. “We thought if we could just make him understand that he had so much potential, and with this potential comes options, he would turn himself around.” Greg Mathison, D’Autrail’s principal, was also dedicated to the teen. “D’Autrail knew he could come to me with any issues that he was facing,” reports Dr. Mathison. “I was there to listen and guide him through the good times and the bad.” So, according to D’Autrail, when the principal—who he liked and respected—instilled a zero tolerance behavior contract with him, it made him sit up and listen. “Dr. Mathison basically told me that if I didn’t change my act, I would not be able to continue at Marquette,” explains D’Autrail. “That upset my mother greatly and I knew my potential and wanted more for him,” she adds. Surrounded by caring people whose actions showed how much they wanted him to succeed, D’Autrail began to exhibit drive and focus, according to Meals. “When he earned a 25 on the ACT, that was the crowning moment.” Upon seeing D’Autrail’s improvements, Meals wanted to give him a chance to be a leader and work with other students. She arranged for him to serve as a teacher aid in her classroom for each of his four years. “It was a chance for him to demonstrate his maturity and responsibility,” she says.

Beloved by this privilege, D’Autrail became a positive influence on her students. “He worked with them on papers, projects, and even reading with students when they missed school.” For those who had behavior issues, “He would talk to them and let them know it is never too late to make an about turn,” she notes. He also took a leadership role in the school’s newly-formed Academic and Cultural Club by recruiting new members.

D’Autrail received his school’s VICE award for outstanding senior by exhibiting academic excellence, community involvement and high character. Explaining his metamorphosis, he cites the help he received from his teachers and principal. “They wanted me to succeed. They made me realize that getting an education is the most important thing in life.”

D’Autrail holds tight to those aspirations while studying mechanical engineering at Missouri Western. “I want to be someone others look up to.”

The Accreditation

Did you get a chance to hear or read President Obama’s recent back to school speech? It could have been headlined, “America’s Future Depends On You!” His comments included several good insights, but one of the things which connected with me and ties into several of the success stories in the current issue of Parent Link was the importance of taking advantage of the opportunities that you are provided. He said, “But at the end of the day, we can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents, the best schools in the world – and none of it will make a difference, none of it will matter unless all of you fulfill your responsibilities, unless you show up to those classes, unless you pay attention to those teachers, unless you listen to your parents and grandparents and other adults and put in the hard work it takes to succeed.”

And that is exactly what transfer student D’Autrail Wafford did. While he was initially reluctant to work hard and make the right decisions, he eventually turned his life around, is a better person group. A common thread runs through all of these stories. Each of these students put forth his or her best effort and each are now or will soon be successfully contributing back to our society. Even when they struggled or became discouraged, they didn’t give up on themselves and continued to succeed. While they may have had some failures along life’s path – as all of us do – they didn’t allow their failures to define them but instead allowed their failures to teach them. They all faced challenges but they refused to give up.

Similarly, each of us have a responsibility to discover our strengths and apply those strengths, talents and abilities to our careers. Indeed, that is a challenge for all of us. We need to set clear goals for ourselves and focus daily on their achievement. Your teachers, your school leaders, your parents, and your family will never give up on you. Don’t ever give up on yourselves!” President Obama said. “Not only are all of us counting on you, America’s future depends upon you.”

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D’Autrail Wafford, now a senior at Missouri Western State University, says his teachers and principal at Rockwood’s Marquette High School knew about him so much that he felt empowered to make changes in his life. Here he stands with teachers Valerie Kami, left, Ami Meals and principal Longing Mathison. Photo by Rockwood School District.