

volunteer

Rockwood eighth-graders de-stress with yoga

Eighth-grade girls in the Rockwood School District are using yoga to help ease stress and anxiety and build confidence.

Some of the district's middle schools are in the second year of offering the weekly after-school program.

"Yoga is a great way to introduce the concept of mindfulness and self-awareness," said Brittany Hogan, coordinator of Education Equity and Diversity in the Rockwood district. "No one was asking for yoga per se, but leaders in some schools were asking for ways to help give our students tools in their own 'toolbox' to work through stress and anxiety."

The sessions are offered in alternate semesters in four of the district's middle schools — two one semester and the other two the next semester. Currently, the participating schools are Crestview, Wildwood, Rockwood Valley and Rockwood South middle schools.

"I began teaching yoga to students because I believe it cultivates physical and mental well-being and also self-confidence," said yoga instructor Melinda Oliver. "A lot of students have circumstances inside and outside the classroom that are challenging and need



Instructor Melinda Oliver (left) poses with members of her eighth-grade afterschool yoga class.

an opportunity to talk about them and reflect. My program is not just yoga. It's also a confidence- and community-building activity as well as a conflict resolution activity."

The number of students participating varies from 10 to 17, depending on the school, Oliver said.

Students in the VICC program may find the biggest benefit of the yoga program to be the community the group builds together, Oliver said. "They know every week there is a safe space where they can come and truly relax and be themselves and get to know their classmates and themselves a little better.

"I also believe yoga and meditation/silent reflection allow students to decompress and learn to deal with stressors in a healthier, more productive way," Oliver said. "This can hopefully lead to better decision-making abilities and confidence."

Oliver also teaches in the St. Louis Public Schools and the Jennings School District.



Mike Bush of KSDK-TV, Channel 5, interviews Xavier Marshall at Rockwood South Middle School.

'Hi'-Five: Middle-schooler gains TV notice with morning greeting ritual

Rockwood South Middle School sixth-grader Xavier Marshall has taken on a traditional duty of school principals — greeting arriving students at the door in the morning.

Xavier, a VICC participant, was featured in a Jan. 27 story on KSDK-TV, Channel 5.

See page 4: **'Hi'-Five**

ST. LOUIS CITY vs. COUNTY SCHOOLS:

Lessons in inequality (and life)

By Claire Stolze

VICC Student at a St. Louis Public School

Recently, a St. Louis County student who attends a St. Louis city magnet school through the VICC program wrote the following editorial for the Occasional Planet website.

As a current high school student in St. Louis, I am often asked which high school I attend, and I am quite proud of my response. I am white, I live in an affluent part of St. Louis County, and I am one of the few students who attend a school outside of their neighborhood district through a desegregation program. I travel about 25 minutes into the city each day to attend a school in the St. Louis City Public Schools (SLPS) district.

Although I love my school, I recognize that the resource allocation in my district, versus that of a suburban district, is very different, which often translates to lower test scores and higher dropout rates. SLPS faces unfortunate structural disadvantages that put it in tough positions and stretch its budget thin. Costs such as transportation, building maintenance and utilities for the SLPS district are higher than those of its county counterparts, and funds devoted to quality curricula have to take a back seat. SLPS is one of the highest-spending districts in Missouri (with an average spending rate of \$14,683 per pupil), and outspends all but three St. Louis County school districts. As a student who has attended an SLPS school for my entire educational career, I can attest that this is quite a shock.

Many school buildings in the district are over 100 years old and cost more to maintain than younger buildings. When compared to the state-of-the-art facilities suburban districts tout, SLPS schools seem outdated. To entice potential students, SLPS offers 30 attractive magnet or choice school programs, which are open to any student in the City and certain students in participating county districts. Nevertheless, low enrollment persists. Some schools have closed as a result, but SLPS has had little success in selling the properties. Condensing struggling schools has led to more transportation costs, and transportation is already a large line item in the budget because of the magnet and choice schools.

Teacher turnover rate is yet another issue. When compared to other districts in the St. Louis area with a similar spending rate per pupil, SLPS pays a very low salary. SLPS pays an average salary of \$46,615 a year and keeps teachers in district for about five years. SLPS often hires first-year teachers, or teachers who have been fired from other districts, because their salaries are less expensive than that of a well-experienced teacher. After gaining experience, these younger teachers often move on to other districts that offer better pay.

In addition to having high costs, revenues are low. Factors such as a poorer tax base and high poverty rate put the SLPS district at an economic disadvantage. On top of this, population in the city has seen a significant drop since its peak in 1950, meaning the district receives less revenue from property taxes and less money from the state because of lower daily attendance in schools. SLPS schools face disadvantages even before students walk in the door.

Higher rates of poverty and less money for textbooks, technology and teachers translate to low test scores. The Valley Park district (which spends less per pupil than SLPS) has almost a 30 percent lead in proficiency ratings (based on MAP score data) in the areas of math, science, social studies and English, when compared to SLPS. As of 2017, the dropout rate for SLPS was almost 15.6 percent, which is almost 13 percent above the Missouri average.

About 40 percent of students at Metro Academic and Classical

High school were living in poverty in 2014, the lowest percentage of students in poverty among schools in the SLPS district.

Coincidentally, Metro is the highest-achieving school in the district and the number one public school in the state, as reported by U.S.

Best News. As shown by the high achievement of SLPS' top three high schools, there is no shortage of smart students in the SLPS system. Again, these are the three schools with the lowest poverty rates in the district. Poverty and lack of resources hinder students in every other school. Although there are still students living in poverty in county schools, it is not such a widespread epidemic.

Personally, I don't feel that we can hold public city schools and public suburban schools to the same standards in their current condition. It makes me angry when people who speak about the low test scores and therefore lesser education provided by the SLPS system blatantly ignore the existing disparities. How can anyone try to equate county and city public schools when the resources are not the same? How can anyone equate two school districts when nothing about them is equal? Time and time again, we see that higher rates of poverty means lower achievement, yet we do nothing but point fingers at the SLPS district for the troubles they face.

Despite the troubles my school faces, I still choose to attend. My school is small, and my teachers devote time to get to know me. My school is diverse, with students from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. The best thing my school has offered me, however, is insight. I get to listen to all types of perspectives and stories from people whose lives are different than mine. Because of my school and the time I have spent with people who live in the city, I have realized that there is a 1:1 ratio among people. I have just as many thoughts, feelings and ideas as anyone else, and this has made me unafraid of people who look different than me or have situations that I could not understand. I have become more empathetic and want to help those who ask for it.

I feel that the life lessons my school has offered me are more important than anything I could learn from a book. I have listened to people from different backgrounds and learned to appreciate the good things in my life. Being with people who do not look or live like I do has made me aware of systemic oppression of minorities and how the poverty cycle affects generation after generation. Seeing all of this has helped me realize that I want a career in public service and that I want to make positive change in St. Louis city. Without the opportunity to attend a public school, I would never have realized this. When I had to choose a high school, I knew that I would be attending a city school, and I am happy with my choice.

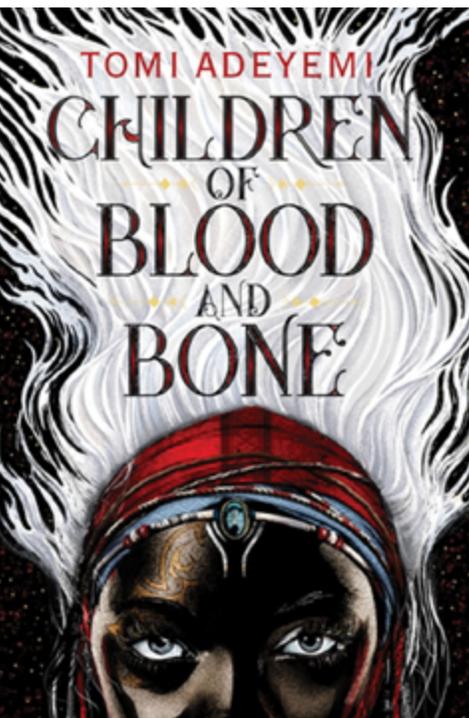
Sources include

- <http://graphics.stltoday.com/apps/payrolls/salaries/teachers/>
- www.slps.org • <http://slpsmagnetschools.org/>
- <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/st-louis-population/>
- Additional statistics provided by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. per the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education website.

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- <http://occasionalplanet.org/2018/08/07/st-louis-city-vs-county-schools-lessons-in-inequality-and-life/>





Read Like Me:

Rockwood reading program features books reflecting culture of students of color

Wildwood Middle School is on the leading edge of a book club program for minority students in the Rockwood School District.

Many students in the voluntary transfer program in the Rockwood School District thrive in their educational pursuits. But Brittany Hogan, coordinator of the education equity and diversity in the district, noticed that the reading material for those students often didn't reflect their culture.

"I think it's really hard when you look at all the books you read at school and you realize there isn't a face or story that sounds similar to your own," Hogan said. "Children need to feel like their stories and culture are represented within their education experience. It supports their growth, development and social emotional health."

With that in mind, Hogan created the "Read Like Me" program in 2016 to expose minority students to more books with characters to which they can relate. She started by buying books for the elementary schools to run small groups with fourth- and fifth-grade boys and girls, then it spread to the middle schools.

Librarians, principals, guidance counselors or social workers host the club and give students a once-a-week time after school to talk about the book, talk about things they see that are like them, Hogan said.

"While there are parts of mainstream stories students can relate to, it's really important for minority children to read stories about people who look like them as well," Hogan said.

The program started small and is still ramping up during the 2018-19 school year, but at Wildwood Middle School, it is in full swing. In fall 2018, the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade girls read "Children of Blood and Bone," by Tomi Adeyemi. The students have also read "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas and "Calling My Name" by Liara Tamani.

The groups read one book per semester. In some cases at Wildwood Middle, sixth graders may read a different book than the seventh and eighth graders.

In the program, a reading group is assigned chapters to read at home, then discusses the reading at the weekly session, said Twylaa Taylor, a social worker at Wildwood Middle who leads the Read Like Me sessions.

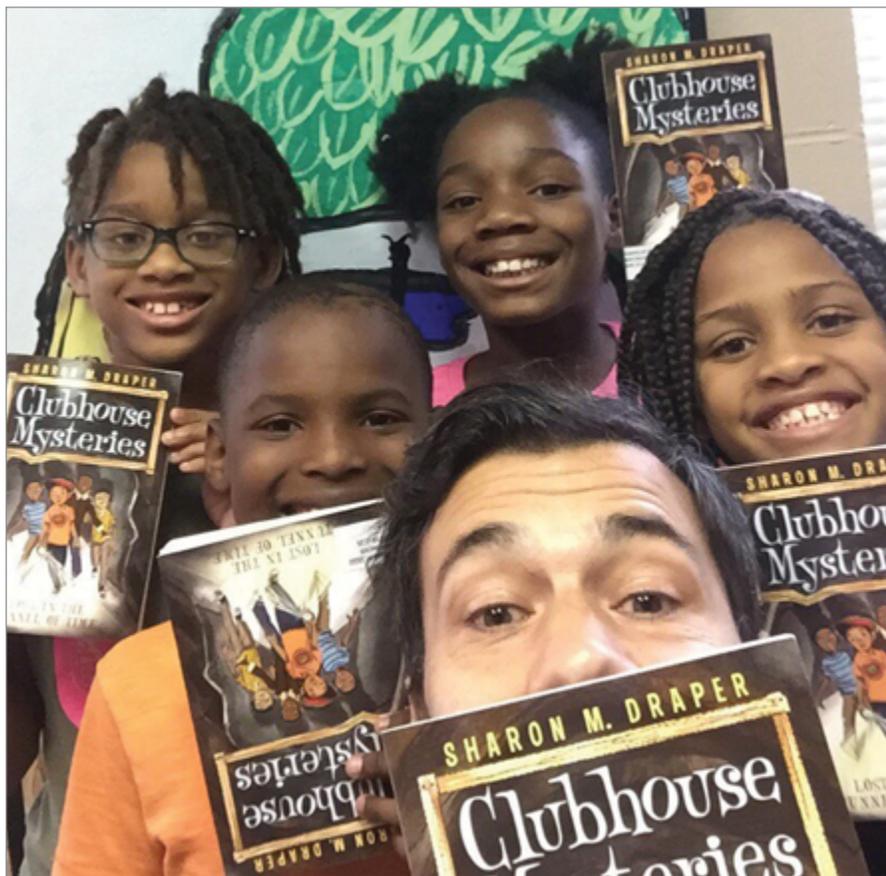
"The majority of the students are engaged in the book discussions and share their thoughts," Taylor said. The students are given guided questions to consider while reading.

About four to ten students typically participate actively in the discussions in each group. "Even if the students aren't exactly openly discussing the book, they are still happy with being a part of Read Like Me as a safe space," Taylor said.

Hogan emphasized that "Learning happens in and outside the classroom. There are so many things that, when you're in a space where you don't see a lot of people who look like you, there are reflections of you that you don't see, and that can be challenging at points. That's why I started Read Like Me."

The program also strives to match up students and books, when possible, by gender. Hogan notes that it's good for girls to read books about girls, and it's important for girls to see good role models, good protagonists and antagonist characters in their literature.

"As we focus on becoming more culturally competent in the district," Hogan said, "this is a way to support Rockwood's efforts and also introduce quality narrative novels about people of color for our kids to read."



Young Rockwood readers pose with their Clubhouse Mysteries books.

Message from the CEO



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As many of you undoubtedly realize, for the past several years, the VICC Board of Directors, comprising county superintendents and the superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools, has been reviewing our long-range plans via a strategic planning process.

One of the first steps in that direction was to extend the program for an additional five years, enabling us to take new students through 2023-24 with an emphasis upon the placement of siblings of all current students. All students placed and enrolled through this extended time may continue attending their selected school through high school graduation, meaning the program could continue until at least 2036.

Due to certain legal limitations on the indefinite continuation of a race-based school integration program, we have been gradually reducing the total number of students participating despite the mutual benefits for all students involved. One of our biggest challenges remains — how do we continue a program that has proven to be beneficial in light of the legal and financial challenges, given that racial segregation since the inception of the program has certainly not

diminished and, in fact, has likely increased in many areas of Metropolitan St. Louis?

Our program has realized and demonstrated much success over the years as documented by empirical data as well as the many individual success stories of countless students. We need to work together as a community and a nation to identify opportunities to continue and expand upon the successes that our students have experienced. It is the goal of the entire VICC Board to continue to work toward that objective, whether that is through the continued support of the VICC program or the pursuit of other opportunities. One option includes working together with the educational community and business leaders in the St. Louis region to transform the VICC program to provide personalized learning and career preparation for all students and to increase academic success, student diversity and student college/career outcomes.

Everyone is excited and energized about the many opportunities available for all of our students under the current program and the opportunities presented by new and innovative options as well. While the details still need to be worked out and resolved, the opportunities available to us are tremendous.

'Hi'-Five *(continued from page 1)*

After riding his bus from St. Louis City to Rockwood South Middle, Xavier takes up his post at the front door with Principal Laurie Birkenmeier and other greeters. Every morning he greets fellow students with a high five and a "hello."

Xavier began his tradition by holding the door open for classmates on the first day of school. Set builders in the theater department soon made doorstops to hold the doors open, so Xavier could stand in front of the doors and welcome students even more energetically. Soon, other students were inspired enough to get into the act, joining him at the door.

Before leaving for his one-hour bus ride home, Xavier sends his fellow students on their way with a "good-bye" at the door.

To watch Xavier in action, see the KSDK video at <https://www.ksdk.com/article/news/local/making-a-difference/a-6th-graders-lesson-in-courtesy-and-kindness/63-17d03c8a-2092-4bda-a038-4ea88428d7d9>

Xavier Marshall is on the job at the front door of Rockwood South Middle School.



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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