Webster Groves High Takes on the Achievement Gap
Principal Jon Clark calls the collaborative push “exciting.”

The Webster Challenge: The students are pumped about it. Faculty and staff, even Central Office administrators, have taken on additional responsibilities to make it work. Parents are encouraged and helping to do their part. Thinking on their own, it’s inspiring.

The goal is to reduce the achievement gap at Webster Groves High School by 50 percent by 2012, reports principal Jon Clark. “Excitement is high” at the degree to which our students, parents, faculty, staff and board members have embraced this idea.

Thanks to a $10,000 grant from the St. Louis Student Transfer Program (SLSTP), the initiative is moving full speed ahead. The principal has encouraged student leaders to be ambassadors for the Webster Challenge. “It would be great if you could get some of the other guys interested in accepting the Challenge.”

The SLSTP, a multi-faceted program that focuses on creating individual and group plans that will enhance opportunities and resources available in our schools, is administered by the Center for Urban Education (CUEd) at Webster University.}

For the past two summers, nearly two dozen VICC students were among the high achieving minority students from Parkway high schools invited to attend the business camp at cost. It is a collaboration between SLSTP and Webster University in Missouri and the Parkside district. “The academic enables students to learn about business majors and engage in activities that enhance their understanding of the business world and the opportunities that pool the pool,” reports Susan Staton, a staffers in MLT’s Parolus College of Business who helps coordinate the annual program.

Each day has a different business focus (management, marketing, accounting, finance and banking and the arts) engage in campus activities with faculty representing that area of study. Classroom visits by alumni and corporate representatives, as well as food tickets, enable students to learn about real-world applications. Teamwork, presentation skills and problem solving abilities are incorporated into lessons.

For students Dejah, LaVonne and Devis Westley, the academy provided interest enough that they chose to enroll in Accounting (this year) at Parkside Central High. Dejah attended the camp this past summer; Dejas, the previous year. Devis, who says he is starting to really like learning about budgeting, banking and investments, believes he will enroll in mathematics in the class. “I still get notes from last summer.”

You may find them attending in the 2008 camp the summer before her sophomore year go to a “head start” in some of the classes they planned to take at Parkside Central. She studied Accounting last year, followed by Personal Finance this past summer, about which she says, “My teacher was amazed at what I already knew!” Yasmine continues her business emphasis by taking Marketing your year. “My mum sees me a businessperson. So do I!” Yasmine’s St. Louis West Parkside High student Dejaavu, a sophomore, enjoyed last summer’s camp, “It came away with this realization, ‘Science is still my thing’ just in fact, she hopes to pursue science at the college level and the camp confirmed for her.” Yasmine is a great place for me.”

The students get a feel for college by residing in dorms and experiencing various aspects of campus life through their daily schedules of activities and entertainment. “I thought the whole experience of being on a college campus, attending classes and learning to lecture was valuable,” says Dejaavu. While Yasmine had previously participated in a summer program at Harris-Stowe University, she had never been to a “big college.”

“The far away schools I always wanted to see Missouri,” says Dejaavu. This was Dejaavu’s first experience on a college campus and he liked both the dorm and the school’s food.

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Explain Clark. These original students, new sophomores, are joined this year be a new class of freshmen. Each subsequent year will bring a new class of students so that all grades are represented in the challenge.

Clark reveals that what prompted him to include the achievement gap in the SLSTP was a comment he heard from two African-American parents during the preceding year. Both were concerned about the achievement gap and black students and what they could be done. “That really got me thinking.” he said.

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Students Motivated to Meet Expectations of Being a Leader

As part of the program, members are involved in the mentoring of younger students, exposing them to the reality of being an African-American guest speaker and doing community service projects. For each of these areas, leadership qualities and strategies for success are incorporated. We concentrate on skills that classroom teachers generally don’t have time to teach,” notes Abernathy, who plans, coordinates and leads each weekly session, meeting with a hand-off from other teachers and parents to help with the management of the activity. As revealed in both group studies, the most meaningful activity for students was the Martin Luther King Jr. assembly, when they got a view of a great leader and learned about their achievements and direction in forming papers on such a great example. I think that many of these students are taking the opportunity to look at their own lives, their own achievements and directions in forming papers on their own goals.

The leadership team is open to all African-American students in grades four and five. Last year, 21 students attended the weekly meetings, held Thursday from 3:30 to 5:00. This year, 53 have registered.

As a guest appearance by former LLU mayor Clarence $Randy$ Kennedy and a field trip to the Black History Wax Museum.

Students at Berkeley School were positive outcomes from Becky’s program, which included a visit to the school where she talked to the students about their studies. They are self-esteem and better are easily expressed by their contributions in class. She created a greater sense of self-confidence in the students.

Additionally, Becky and her team believe there is more need for parent participation in the school – “from seeing our school community to attending conferences and open houses.” The parents too seem to feel more comfortable with the school, she points out.

A kindergarten boy (in the story) explains, “The program’s bottom line is that the relationship that grows among the participants themselves, between students and teachers, and between the students and the teachers who help with the program, will all be reflected in the students’ test scores.”

The mentoring component, a high priority to the students, brings the team members and parents from the African-American schools from a kindergarten or first-grade class. The students, the hip-ster's inquisitive, the younger one in a classroom. Other favorite activities were being more articulate, better at advocating for themselves and even more knowledgeable about their rich heritage.

The focus groups also revealed that participants and their parents the leadership team has been helping our gains in student confidence, responsibility, helpfulness at home and being more organized and motivated at school. Parents report that the program has brought more cultural awareness to their homes and a stronger bond and friendship among the students.

Principal Beth Scott says that being part of the leadership team “has empowered students to step up and accept leadership traits” adding that Becky’s program’s potential teaching girls consists of “teaching girls to think about the behavior and make improvements where needed.” Finally, the key to this successful program, Scott says, “is Becky’s ability, passion and skills at dedication toward the students in her care.”

Abernathy would like to see all other schools in the city adopt the same program and turn the middle school program into the model for other schools in the city. The students are excited and enthusiastic about the different aspects of the program, as the mentors are there to help them.

The mentors are also encouraged to participate in other community service activities and continue as the school community grows. For this reason, the mentors are continuously involved in the community service projects and are encouraged to share their experiences as they participate.

Some of the students at Berkeley High School have become more confident and are beginning to think of themselves as part of a leadership team, which was started in order to allow the students in the classroom, living with and attending school, to learn about leadership skills and develop their leadership potential.