

Message from the CEO



Fall. The season of harvest. For farmers, it's the time of year when they literally reap what had been sown earlier. The fruits of their labor are realized. Massive combines articulate under spacious skies through amber fields of grain, efficiently and methodically plucking the valuable commodity from its previously protective – but now useless – natural packaging. It's the culminating act, the curtain call following months of hard work and nurturing as first, financing was secured; equipment, maintained; crop plans, made; planting strategies, developed; soil, fertilized and tilled (or not); seeds, selected and planted; and herbicides and pesticides, applied.

Then there's that not so small matter of reckoning with Mother Nature! It's an annual production cycle that the average citizen is removed from, unfamiliar with, nearly oblivious to . . . and yet it profoundly affects every American's health and finances on a daily basis.

Health is inextricably tied to diet. "You are what you eat" is the old saying. And nowadays that pretty much means – one way or another – you are what they grow down on the farm. Nearly every food item in every store aisle is either directly or indirectly derived from the soil. Unprocessed or processed. Pure or derivative. Organic or modernized. Paper or plastic – so to speak.

There's also a significant budget connection. According to several personal budgeting websites, about 13 to 14 percent of the average family's budget goes for food. And farm productivity certainly affects both food pricing and selection. Ever notice what happens to the price for a loaf of bread when wheat prices rise?

Which brings me to my point – FINALLY! Much has been noted about the agricultural roots of the traditional school calendar. However, there are actually many more similarities between the agricultural cycle and modern education than that. Each year available resources are assessed; teaching strategies, considered; lesson plans, developed; classrooms, organized; instructional "seeds," planted and nurtured; homework, assigned. Then, come April – the end of the annual educational growing season – productivity is assessed. A great MAP test reaping machine descends upon the schools to efficiently and methodically bring in the year's sheaves of achievement. Hopefully, yields will be good and AYP targets will be met. After all, no less than the long-term health and stability of the United States economy – and the standard of living of its citizenry – depends on what is happening in your classroom . . . just as they do on the farmer's field.

Are you planting the right seeds at the right time in the right fields? Are you enriching the classroom soil, irrigating when necessary to compensate for Mother Nature's (environmental) deficiencies? Are you weeding out the distractions, addressing the negative influences and maintaining high expectations for all students? Is your school going to be ready for the end-of-season reckoning? Then perhaps you would be interested in the efforts other schools are making to try to increase their achievement yields. Schools with programs like those profiled in this issue of the Volunteer. Schools such as Webster Groves High School, Glenridge Elementary (Clayton) and several Parkway high schools which believe that strategic student investments will pay measurable dividends not only come harvest-time, but for a life-time. I hope you find them as encouraging as I do!!!

Of course, I did grow up on a farm, you know . . .

Bruce

Business Camp

Helps Shape Students' Academic, Professional Plans

A week-long summer business academy at Mizzou has influenced some Parkway voluntary transfer students to plan their high school courses with college and a possible profession in mind.



Parkway students who attended the Trulaske College of Business Academy at Mizzou for the past two summers explored all facets of business and, in doing so, were able to gauge if it is an area they might want to continue to study, both in high school or at the college level. The week-long Mizzou camp also gave them an idea of what college life is like. Photo by Susan Klusmeier, University of Missouri

by Peggy Magee

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 no cost. It is a collaboration between the University of Missouri and the Parkway district.

"The academy enables students to learn about business majors and engage in activities that enhance their understanding of the business world and the opportunities that exist for them," reports Susan Klusmeier, a staffer in MU's Trulaske College of Business who helps coordinate the annual program.

Each day has a different business focus (management, marketing, accounting, finance and banking) and students engage in classroom activities with faculty representing that area of study. Classroom visits by alumni and corporate recruiters, as well as field trips, enable students to learn about real world applications. Teamwork, presentation skills and problem solving abilities are incorporated into lesson plans.

For students Dejah Lanos and Devon Westley, the academy piqued their interest enough that they chose to enroll in Accounting I this year at Parkway Central High. Devon attended the camp this past summer; Dejah, the previous year. Devon, who says he is "starting to really like" learning about budgeting, banking and investments, believes he'll have an edge in the class. "I can use my notes from last summer."

Yasmine Harris-Leflore enrolled in the 2008 camp the summer before her sophomore year to get a "head start" in some of the classes she planned to take at Parkway Central. She studied Accounting I 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 this year. "My mom sees me as a businessperson. So do I."

Although Parkway West student Daysha Baskin, a sophomore, enjoyed last summer's camp, she came away with this realization, "Science is still my strong suit." In fact, she hopes to pursue science at the college level and the camp confirmed for her, "Mizzou is a good place for me."

The students got a feel for college by residing in dorms and experiencing various aspects of campus life through their daily schedule of activities and entertainment. "I thought the whole experience of being on a college campus, attending classes and listening to lectures was valuable," notes Dejah. And while Yasmine had previously participated in a summer program at Harris-Stowe University, she had never been to a "big major college," adding, "I have always wanted to see Mizzou." This was Devon's first experience on a college campus and he liked both his dorm and the cafeteria food.

And so the camp fulfilled another goal, as described by MU's Susan Klusmeier, "to showcase all of the wonderful facilities and resources available at Mizzou."

volunteer

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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Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

Webster Groves High Takes on the Achievement Gap

Principal Jon Clark calls the collaborative push "exciting"

by Peggy Magee

The Webster Challenge: The students are pumped about it. Faculty and staff, even Central Office administrators, have taken on added responsibility to make it work. Parents are enthused and helping to do their part. There's a buzz ... and it's spreading.

The goal is to reduce the achievement gap at Webster Groves High School by 50 percent by 2012, reports principal Jon Clark. "It's exciting to see the degree to which our students, parents, faculty, staff and board members have embraced this initiative."

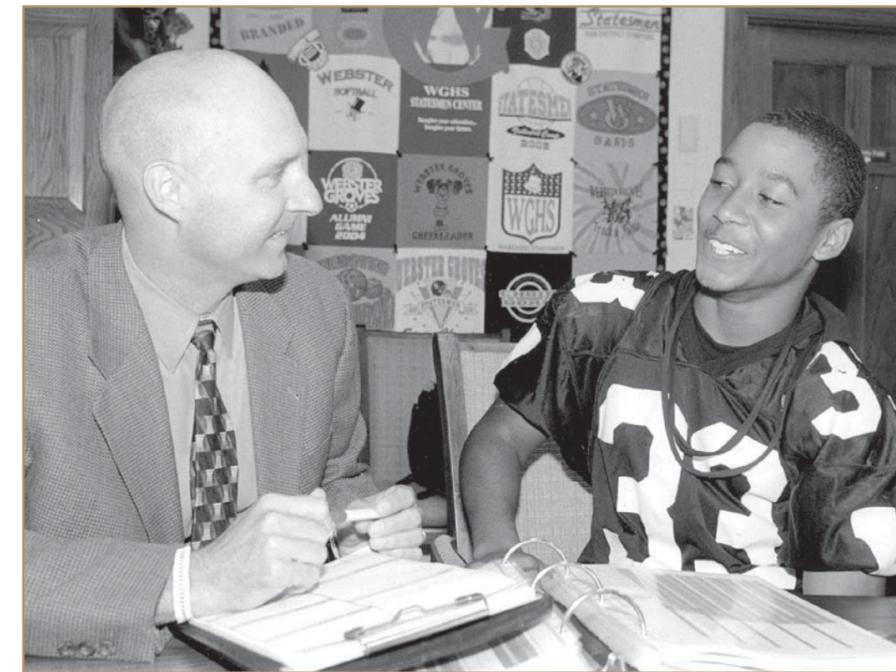
Begun last school year (with some financial backing from the Webster Groves School District Foundation), the strategy is to actively engage the entire school community in working to close the achievement gap. The inaugural Challenge class began with 32 students and grew to 50. "It was open to all African-American freshmen and those who joined ranged from high level, involved students to those at risk,"

explains Clark. Those original students, now sophomores, are joined this year by a new class of freshmen. Each subsequent year will bring on a new freshman class until eventually all grades are represented in the challenge.

Clark reveals that what prompted him to tackle the achievement gap issue more aggressively were the conversations he had with two African-American seniors the preceding year. Both were concerned about the achievement levels of black students and noted that they wished more could be done. "That really got me thinking," he said.

And so the Webster Challenge was created, a multi-faceted program that focuses on setting individual and group goals and providing additional opportunities and resources

See inside **WEBSTER GROVES**



Principal Jon Clark serves as a personal advisor to many students as part of the Webster Challenge, an initiative by all members of the school community to reduce the achievement gap at Webster Groves High School. Here, he checks on sophomore football player Dante Flowers, a high achieving VICC student, asking him about his course schedule and honors classes this year. "Is there anything you need from me?" Clark asks him. The principal has encouraged Dante to be an ambassador for the Webster Challenge saying, "It would be great if you could get some of the other guys interested in accepting the Challenge."

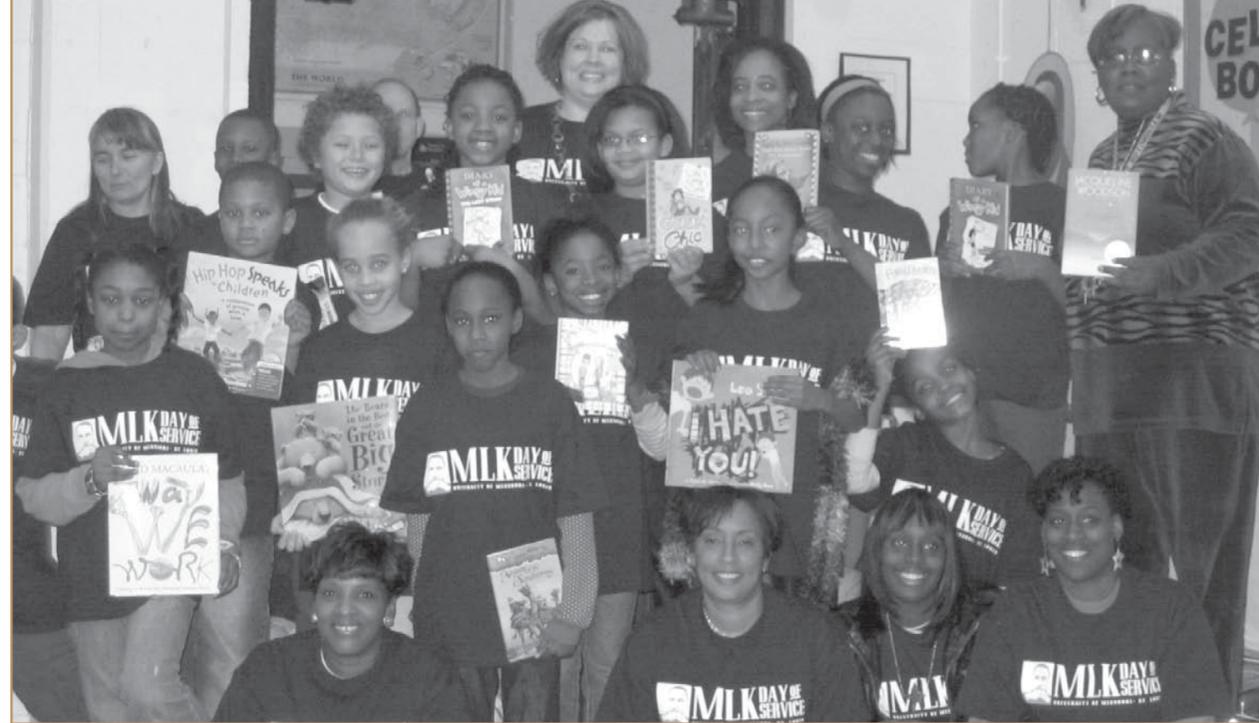
Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

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Some of the students in the African-American Leadership Team show their pride after the completion of a volunteer project at Normandy's Washington School. Community service, mentoring, guest speakers and African-American heritage studies are components of the weekly, after school program run by teacher Becky Abernathy, pictured in back at left. Relatives of students also volunteered that day.

Photo provided by Glenridge School



Students Motivated to Meet Expectations of Being a Leader

African-American students at Clayton's Glenridge Elementary School are more invested in their education and focused on being school leaders as a result of being part of a leadership team launched last November by teacher Becky Abernathy. A bonus outcome of Abernathy's ongoing communication with the participants' parents is that many have become more connected with the school in other ways.

The African-American Leadership Team was formed "to give students the skills and confidence to be more successful in the classroom," reports the fourth grade teacher whose eight years of teaching have all been spent at Glenridge. "I let them know that being part of this special group means demonstrating the qualities of a leader, and I teach them what those are. I stress the importance of listening, following directions and turning in papers on time, for example. I hold them accountable to these expectations."

The leadership team is open to all African-American students in grades four and five. Last year, 21 students attended the weekly meetings, held Thursdays from 3:30 - 6 p.m. This year 31 have registered.

As part of the program, members are involved in the mentoring of younger students, exploring their heritage, hearing from African-American guest speakers 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 cover," notes Abernathy, who plans, coordinates and leads each weekly session, receiving a hand from other teachers and/or parents to help manage the activity.

As revealed in focus group studies, the most meaningful activity for students was the Martin Luther King Day of Service, when they gave a makeover to the library of a school in the Normandy district. Prior to that, they had taken up a school wide collection to purchase books which they donated to the library. "The students indicated that the library project made them feel especially grateful for all that they have," notes Abernathy.

The mentoring component, a highlight for some students, involves training the team members and then pairing them with an African-American student from a kindergarten or first grade class. Once a month, the older pupil works with the younger one in a classroom activity. Other favorite activities were a

guest appearance by former St. Louis mayor Clarence Harmon and a field trip to the Black World History Wax Museum.

Teachers at Glenridge School see positive outcomes from Becky's program. Fifth grade teacher Joan Von Dras made this observation about her students: "Their self-esteem and interest are clearly evident by their contributions in class." She noticed a "greater sense of belonging" in the students.

Additionally, Von Dras believes there is more VICC parent participation in the school - "from serving on school committees to attending conferences and open houses." The parents too seem to feel more comfortable with the school, she points out.

For kindergarten intern Roz Dubinsky, the program's bottom line is the relationships that develop - among the participants themselves, between mentor and mentee, among the students and the teachers who help with the program, as well as with those teachers and the participants' parents. "All of these relationships center around our shared interest in seeing the students succeed."

Tina Garcia, a third-grade teacher, describes Abernathy's leadership team as "such a positive experience for all!" She says last year's participants became

"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 believe the leadership team has been beneficial, citing 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 students and fostered a bond and friendship among children in the group.

Principal Beth Scott agrees that being part of the leadership team "has empowered students to step up and acquire leadership traits," adding that Abernathy's "proactive, no excuses" teaching style causes students "to reflect on the behaviors and actions of a leader and make improvements where needed." Finally, the key to this successful program, Scott says, is "Becky Abernathy's passion, skills and dedication toward the students in her care."

Abernathy would like her program to expand into other elementary schools and then continue at the middle school level. "We have seen how well students respond when you inform them about what is expected of a school leader and encourage them to be one. These are behaviors and attitudes that directly impact achievement."



African-American students at Glenridge School have become more focused and confident being part of a leadership team which was started to enhance their achievement levels in the classroom. Leadership skills and strategies for success are taught in activities as pictured above, including from top, mentoring a younger student, creating signage for another school's library as part of a community service project, and baking cookies for someone they especially appreciate. Photos provided by Glenridge School

to meet them. Students are each assigned a teacher mentor who checks in with them regularly and offers help, in addition to an advisor who monitors their progress and communicates with their parents.

A staffer called a student support advocate checks grades and assignments weekly and communicates with the student, teachers and parents, as needed, to keep the student on track.

Assistance is also given in course selection and efforts are made to assign several students to the same class so that they can help one another and provide support. The after school tutoring program is heavily promoted for those needing more help.

For both students and parents, regular meetings are held featuring progress updates, guest speakers and time to talk about success stories and/or obstacles. For students, those discussions are handled in small group settings and moderated by faculty advisors. Next year, the program for the upper level students will include college preparation and tours.

The inaugural class of 2012 kicked off the challenge by establishing these group goals: to have at least 90 percent participation in an activity or sport, at least 95 percent attendance rate and a 3.0 grade point average or better. The first two were met and the group came very close to meeting the third.

Individual goals ranged from bringing up a B earned in the first semester to an A in the second and picking up an extracurricular activity to reducing the number of days absent and passing all classes. In the second semester, students who seriously struggle were targeted. "We personally asked them to join the Challenge and make the commitment. We saw results from all students."

Sophomore Dante Flowers, who is not one of those struggling students, joined the Challenge last year, "so I would have another reason to keep my grades up." The VICC student athlete takes honors classes and makes good grades. He says his main impetus for working hard in school is to meet the high expectations of his dad. Also, he

says, "I want to do my part to close the gap and to set an example for the guys on my team."

That's Jon Clark's vision - that students in the Challenge serve as ambassadors for the program. "We want Challenge students to set the tone and model positive behavior so that others follow in their footsteps."

But the key to narrowing the achievement gap at Webster is to "change the climate," Clark believes, by "making students aware at a younger level the significance of their high school years and how it directly impacts their future success. They begin to see the importance of building a good final transcript and personal profile."

Sophomore Courtney Jones, a voluntary transfer student, says that as a freshman she didn't get off to a great start academically. But once she joined the Challenge, about midway through the first semester, "I started to get better grades." She ended the year with a 3.3 grade point average and attributes her success to the pep talks she received "from all the people involved in the program," including her advisor Dr. Clark, her mentor Jessica Brockmeyer, and other students who helped her with her homework.

When sophomore Kelsie Johnson talks about the Challenge, she cites the "great" snacks at the meetings and the movie gift cards given out at the recognition banquet to students who had achieved their goals. Also keeping Kelsie fueled are the words of encouragement and nice gestures from her mentor and advisor. "I don't want to disappoint them," she says.

But making Webster High School an exception to the national achievement gap statistics is this VICC student's main motivator, she says. "I was truly surprised to learn how much disparity in achievement exists. That's why I work extra hard to make sure I do my part to eliminate the gap here at Webster."

With everyone focused on that goal, the Challenge is making a positive difference at Webster Groves High School, Courtney Jones is sure of that. "It has caught on. People are serious about it."