

Urban high school's rare feat: No dropouts

Camden, N.J., school built around student's passions, community project

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CAMDEN, N.J. - Angelo Drummond wears a pressed white shirt and a red power tie for his two-hour presentation to his harshest critics — a panel of fellow students at Camden's MetEast High School.

The stocky 17-year-old lays out his intention to study through the summer to bring up his scores on the SAT and New Jersey's high school graduation exam. He also explains his senior-year project to plan a lounge where teenagers can hang out, study and avoid the trouble that snags so many in his city.

His peers tell the junior he needs to get his timeline together to apply for grants for the lounge, that he might need to scale back his ambitions for the project, and that he needs to learn more about how nonprofit organizations get grants.

It's an extraordinary display of wisdom for students in a city where dropout rates are consistently among New Jersey's highest and test scores are among the lowest.

Neither is the case at MetEast, which graduated its first class of seniors on Friday.

It opened in 2005 as a laboratory for education in a city where the schools are part of an entanglement of problems.

It's one of about 60 schools nationwide established with the help of Big Picture Learning, a nonprofit with offices in San Diego and Providence, R.I. Three Big Picture schools are scheduled to open in Newark this fall.

'Advisers,' not teachers

The schools are small and very different from traditional schools. MetEast has just over 100 students — less than one-tenth the enrollment at each of the city's comprehensive high schools. The educators are called "advisers," not teachers, and they advise the same group of students all four years.

Classes are built around the idea that students will learn by following their passions. Students do internships. Graduation requirements include a senior project with the aim of doing some good for the community.

And four times a year, every student makes a presentation to a panel that includes students and adults from outside the school.

That's what put a confident Angelo Drummond put behind a lectern, explaining how he's come to know himself better by studying daily for the SAT. "This is something I'm very proud of because I've never stuck with something," he says.

Besides talking about their progress, the students also must moderate a discussion of a topic they chose. Drummond's topic is a gang shooting that happened days earlier in Trenton.

It's not esoteric for the audience. Drummond's peers talk about the gang members they know.

"Our students have the same issues, dilemmas and challenges as students at the larger high schools," says principal Timothy Jenkins. The graduating class includes students who became pregnant or homeless but still made it through school.

All 30 students who began as freshman at MetEast four years ago have graduated from high school somewhere, including a handful that have moved or transferred, Jenkins says.

That's a contrast to what happens in the city's two traditional high schools.

According to state Education Department figures, nearly 1 in 7 Camden High students dropped out in the 2007-08 school year. At Woodrow Wilson High, it was almost 1 in 11. Critics say those dropout

rates are understated, but still, both schools were among the 20 in the state with the highest dropout rates.

All 28 students graduating from MetEast have been accepted to at least one college. Jenkins expects most of them to attend in the fall.

'Learning communities'

Denasia Mixson, for example, plans to study criminal justice at Rowan University. She says she wanted to be a teacher until an internship in education soured her on the idea. Then, she interned in law enforcement, which made her want to become a homicide detective in her hometown.

Her big senior research paper is on what went wrong in the city that was once a major manufacturing hub. Her theory: the long industrial decline over the last several decades, along with the arrival of crack dealing in the 1980s.

The people who study Camden believe a major turnaround is possible only by improving the schools.

To accomplish that, the school district — like many across the country — is focusing on building small "learning communities" by breaking up bigger institutions. The Big Picture schools are a radical version of that.

In Camden, there's evidence that the concept is working.

The city's two magnet schools — one focuses on health careers, the other on the arts — have strong records.

But MetEast is different because its curriculum is further from the traditional and because it's not a magnet school.

And unlike charter schools that have sprung up in Camden during the last decade, MetEast is run by the city's school district.

Potential model

Students don't need to meet any academic standards to get in, though they and their families do have to commit to follow the unusual model. Spots are filled through a lottery.

The school district sees MetEast as a model.

"They would not have thrived in the comprehensive high schools," says school district spokesman Bart Leff. "But they are thriving at MetEast."

During Drummond's presentation, adviser Keinan Thompson congratulates him for starting to take school seriously.

And Heidi Segall Levy, a project manager at Philadelphia's Community Design Collaborative, where Drummond is interning, says she'll work with him to focus his ideas for the teen lounge.

But it's the assessment from Mixson, the aspiring detective, that impresses Drummond. "You did a good job," she tells him. "You surprised me."

"It surprises me that you said that," he says, beaming.

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