



November 19, 2003

Academy Ignites New Hopes

Expectations are high that Academy Prep Center in East Tampa will reach its students, and transform its community.

By MELANIE AVE
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA -Lisa Stokes is banking her daughter's education on Tampa's new Academy Prep Center.

The Tampa woman transferred her daughter Lachrisha to the private school from a public elementary school, hoping to give her a chance to reach her full potential.

"I want her to have a wonderful education," said Stokes, a single mother. "I want her to graduate from high school, go to college, have a nice life, stable employment."

She's not the only one with high hopes for Academy Prep, a private school aimed at teaching disadvantaged children through longer days, an extended school year and a disciplined environment. Many see the school as a cornerstone in the revitalization of decaying East Tampa.

Indeed, the school shines like a new car in a lot filled with rusty autos. Academy Prep stands on the property of the historic V.M. Ybor Grammar School on E Columbus Avenue, where many homes have metal bars on their windows

and abandoned buildings are boarded up.

The 2-acre property is surrounded by newly sodded green grass and trees. Two new buildings act as the classrooms behind the 95-year-old grammar school that once educated hundreds of Italian, Spanish and Cuban immigrant families. The grammar school is being renovated to have offices, an auditorium, a computer lab and a library.

The dreams many have for the school crystalized Tuesday during the official grand opening, held beneath a new outdoor pavilion and attended by dignitaries including Bucs quarterback Shaun King.

"This is one of those special days . . . when you see the community coming together in a very tangible and significant way to make Tampa a better place," said Mayor Pam Iorio.

This school is about high expectations."

Affiliated with the 7-year-old Academy Prep Center of St. Petersburg, the school began this August with 30 fifth-graders who study in same-sex classrooms.

The school currently has four full-time teachers and 25 fifth-graders, most of them black.

Prospective students must qualify for Enrollment will increase to 120 students in grades 5 through 8 in the next three years.

Prospective students must qualify for free or reduced-price lunches because of low family income, be interviewed and attend a four-week summer program. Parents must also agree to volunteer 50 hours a year.

The students attend for free. Their tuition, currently valued at \$20,000 annually, is paid for by local businesses, foundations and the state's Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

"What we're doing is holding the children to standards they should be held to," said Lincoln Tamayo, head of the school and a Cuban immigrant. He came to the school after leading a successful campaign to overturn bilingual education in Massachusetts last year.

Too often in this country we do not provide an equal opportunity to success." Academy Prep's approach differs greatly from traditional public schools. The children begin their day at 7:15 a.m. with breakfast followed by a prayer. They take regular academic classes - English, science, history, math, Spanish and art - until 3 p.m. followed by an hour and a half of study hall and karate, drama and chess classes until 6:30 p.m.

Two Saturdays a month the children

take educational field trips.

Teacher Ted McNair, who retired from the Air Force, came to Academy Prep after teaching at DeSoto Elementary. He sees many similarities between the 11 boys in his classroom and his own upbringing. The son of a welfare mother who was born in College Hill public housing, McNair believes the disciplined environment and small classes help the children prepare for a successful life.

The children are expected to behave and learn that for every action, good or bad, there's a consequence.

Mostly, though, it's about expectations. "I don't really see them as kids with problems," McNair said. "I see them as open books."

During the grand opening, Joe Clark, president of the Eckerd Family Foundation, announced an \$800,000 matching grant to benefit the school. Modern Business Associates agreed to contribute the first \$25,000 toward the goal of raising another \$800,000 from the community. ♦

- Times researcher Cathy Wos contributed to this report.

PHOTO, JEN SENS Fifth-grader Genesis Serrano, 10, and her classmates at Academy Prep Center, prepare to begin the school's opening ceremonies with greetings in Spanish on Tuesday afternoon