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Tough school turns kids around

By DONNA WINCHESTER

Academy Prep practices strict discipline, and after seven years, its students surpass the rest of the county again and again.

ST. PETERSBURG - Quietly, steadily, a grand yet small educational experiment has been gaining momentum amid spreading live oaks in a bucolic setting off busy 22nd Avenue S.

Following a unique prescription that combines rigorous academics with strict discipline, Academy Prep Center for Education has for seven years been taking black children who could succeed but statistically are more likely to fail and turning them into students who perform at or above the levels of children in Pinellas County's best public schools. Candidates for the newest class are awaiting news of their acceptance.

The school at 2301 22nd Ave. S was modeled after a private school on New York City's Lower East Side that provides a free education to a small group of students who are poor, predominantly African-American and, for the most part, from single-parent homes. The children's low test scores and lackluster achievement often caused them to be pegged as failures while they were still in elementary school.

A group of educators at the New York City school believed that with a little direction, some discipline and a lot of attention, the children could soar. The founding members of Academy Prep - a financially successful white couple with a soft spot for children at risk and an African-American couple who had dedicated their lives to teaching - believed the same thing could happen here.

In the next few days, the newest class - 15 boys and 15

girls - will get letters inviting them to the school as fifth-graders. About 50 children completed summer classes at the school last week as a prerequisite for fall admission, along with close to 100 others who already attend grades 6, 7 and 8.

Those who are accepted will spend the next four years of their lives stretching themselves academically and socially, taking advantage of a rare opportunity to show they are the exception to the pattern: minority students who can perform as well or better than their white counterparts in public schools.

Their predecessors have paved the way. Seven of the nine boys who were members of Academy Prep's first graduating class in 2000 graduated from high school in May. The school's first class of girls, who entered the school that same year, are headed for high school. Because they have a track record stretching back a few years, the center's leaders feel comfortable pointing to the school's success at turning around disadvantaged youth.

While most of their peers are struggling mightily - statistics show that only 26 percent of Pinellas' black students are reading at grade level compared with 61 percent of nonblack students - test scores of Academy Prep students tell a different story.

Fifth-graders who enter the school with limited math skills are outperforming other children their age after a single semester. Those who come in with third-grade reading skills are graduating four years later with test scores two grades above their counterparts.

In fact, student performance in March on a standardized test similar to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test produced scores higher than those of children in

the district's highly regarded magnet and fundamental schools.

Academy Prep has been able to produce such results at no charge to the students. The school is able to live within its \$1.3-million budget due to individual, business, and corporate donations, corporate tax credit scholarships, and fundraising efforts.

Principal Jesse Williams, who has overseen daily operations at Academy Prep since it opened in 1997 with 30 fifth- and sixth-graders, says he doesn't need test scores to tell him his students are succeeding.

He knows they are making progress by the excitement with which they approach their day, by the way they look him in the eye when he addresses them, and by their respectful attitude toward their teachers and each other.

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Children don't always arrive at Academy Prep with those attributes, Williams said. Often, they are angry. Years of academic failure have left them frustrated and insecure. They struggle to get along with others.

Williams considers it the school's responsibility to bring the students up academically, to instill in them ethical values, and to introduce them to a larger world that may have been closed to them because of their economic situations.

The rigorous 11-month-a-year program begins at 7:45 a.m. and lasts as late as 6:30 p.m. Boys and girls attend classes separately. They spend six hours on classroom work and an hour on after-school activities such as golf, tennis, sailing, dance, music and drama. Those who fall below a B in any subject attend mandatory study hall. Campus cleanup is a regular part of their routine.

Friday evening and Saturday activities include trips to museums and other cultural venues, school-based oratorical contests and basketball tournaments. Parents are expected to participate in their children's education by signing off on homework and attending regularly scheduled meetings of the parent-teacher organization.

The students adhere to a strict dress code: hard-sole shoes, polo shirts or blouses with collars, and black, navy, or khaki shorts, pants, or skirts. Girls may wear one pair of stud earrings. Boys may wear only watches.

Girls' hairstyles should be "conservative," without added color, beads or other accents. Boys' hair must not exceed an inch in length.

While some might say Academy Prep's insistence on strict discipline coupled with compulsory parental involvement is too tough, Williams thinks it's the only way to reach some children.

"This is about helping students, especially those who are failing in the public schools," he said. "I feel like we're serving children whose needs for the most part have not been addressed."

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The arrival of Brenda S. Thompson, who took over as head of school last year, has further accelerated the school's efforts to help struggling students. Thompson, who was an assistant dean at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee before coming to Academy Prep, increased technology in the classroom by introducing a new software system that allows children to work independently in science and math. The program provides an assessment to teachers so they know how well the students are comprehending the material.

Thompson also increased the school's emphasis on test preparation. And this coming year, she will expand the school's character education program from a five-week plan to a fully integrated, everyday discipline.

"This is the last possible moment we could have gotten to these children and have an impact," she said, referring to both the school's academic and character-building components. Along with Williams, Thompson is highly visible around the campus. Beginning with a morning "convocation" on the basketball court, which requires the children to line up by height, gender and grade, the two administrators spend a large part of their day circulating and getting to know the students on a personal basis.

On a recent afternoon, Williams rounded the corner of the cafeteria and encountered a group of girls waiting in line for their lunch. Singling out two of them who were talking loudly, he asked them to whom they were speaking. They immediately lowered their voices.

The emphasis on politeness and respect is part of what Williams and Thompson call "creating the well-rounded

student.” In order for the students to survive in the world, the administrators say, they will need to demonstrate more than high academic achievement.

That’s why the school focuses so much on extracurricular activities. With the support of the local community, the students learn to swim and play golf. They attend concerts and sports events. This summer, a community volunteer helped them form a steel drum band, which Williams predicts will become a school signature.

Years ago, the principal started a Boy Scout troop at the school not only as a way to introduce children to leadership but also as a means of getting dads involved in their sons’ lives.

“A lot of the boys are angry because they don’t have dads who spend time with them,” Williams said. “We can’t get involved in trying to mend fences between moms and dads, but we can try to get the dads back in the boys’ lives.”

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Much of what the founders introduced seven years ago is still in place.

The school continues to serve students who have the ability and desire to succeed in a rigorous academic environment but who, because of their backgrounds, would be unlikely to receive a private school education. The main requirement for admission remains their eligibility for the federal government’s free or reduced-price lunch program, along with their successful completion of the summer session.

Toni Kennedy, whose 11-year-old daughter already attends Academy Prep, spent the last six weeks hoping her son Wyatt would be accepted for the fall term. Kennedy, a single parent, said the 10-year-old already idolizes the principal.

“I watch him standing back on his heels, and I know he’s kind of imitating Mr. Williams, who is a strong, positive, black male figure,” she said. “My son can look at him and say, ‘Hey, I wouldn’t mind growing up to be a black man in America.’”

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Another critical piece that has remained in place throughout the school’s history is its commitment to supporting students beyond the four years they spend at Academy Prep. Through a graduate support program, the school matches matriculating eighth-graders to public and private schools willing to provide full-tuition scholarships. The students who graduated in May, for example, will attend schools such as St. Petersburg High, St. Petersburg Catholic, Berkley Prep and Admiral Farragut Academy.

Traditionally, 95 percent of the students who graduate from Academy Prep stay in school. Overall, less than 38 percent of black students in Pinellas who entered high school as ninth-graders in 1998 received traditional diplomas in 2002.

Their success can be attributed to a large degree to director of graduate support Keturah Mills, who follows the students’ progress through high school, providing additional tutoring if needed to keep them on track. Then, as the students prepare for graduation, she helps them find spots - tuition free - at some of the country’s best colleges and universities.

A separate reserve fund covers clothing and book expenses of high school and college students, said John Erik Savitsky, vice president for development for Academy Prep Foundation.

Like Williams and Thompson, Savitsky is convinced that Academy Prep’s recipe of tough love and high expectations works where other educational methods fail for students in danger of being left behind.

“Academy Prep’s success, in our opinion, is not an indictment of the public school system,” he said. “It’s difficult to do in seven hours a day what you can do in 11. It’s difficult to do with a class of 35 students what you can do with a class of 15.”

“The kids deserve to dream,” he said. “But sometimes, we have to show them what the dream looks like.”