



## The Republican.

### Marie Grady: HCC's Gateway to College program picks up where schools leave off

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They are supposed to be reduced to statistics by now, a stark reminder in black and white of the dismal dropout rates in urban high schools.

Instead, this group of young people gathered outside a class at Holyoke Community College are living, breathing testaments to what has gone wrong in American education and what is going right.

They come from different backgrounds and cultures but all of their stories have the same refrain: Disenchanted and disillusioned with high school, they seemed all but discounted by educators - until they discovered HCC's Gateway to College program. Now, instead of facing life as dropouts, they are on their way, not only to a high school diploma, but a college degree.

Astonishingly, this program started by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation nationally - and supported locally by member school districts - will end up costing less per student than many traditional public education programs.

For students like Mike DeJesus, it was not that they didn't "get it" in traditional school; it's that traditional schools just didn't "get" them. DeJesus received perfect scores on two recent Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests. A 17-year-old Springfield resident who was attending Longmeadow High School through the School Choice program, his mother steered him here when problems cropped up at school.

"There's more freedom, more flexibility," he says.

Damaris DelValle, 18, of the Indian Orchard section of Springfield, was so disengaged in school that she wasn't showing up. Her mother wanted her to at least get her General Educational Development certification. "I didn't want just a GED," she says.

Denise Calderwood, director of the program, knows how kids can be labeled early on. What was her label? "Troublemaker." After dropping out of her school, she became a police officer there a few years later. She later became the first woman to run for sheriff in her Florida county and now has two higher education degrees.

The schools of today, she says, are still modeled on the schools of the 1950s, but the students - many self-taught - are light years away. When she was in school, one out of four students dropped out; today, one out of two doesn't graduate in large urban high schools.

The consequences? About \$1 million less in lifetime earnings and the likelihood that this forgotten class will bear another one.

The college was among five nationwide to receive a \$350,000 grant for this program for students ages 16 to 20 last year. Ultimately, the \$8,000 a year each it will cost to educate 350 students over three years will come from member public school districts, many of whom are paying more than that per pupil to educate

students in their system.

By 2010, as many as 250 such programs will be up and running nationwide.

It is a model that is working. Through the first eight weeks, students with a history of skipping school had perfect attendance.

Dustin VanderMost, 18, had given up on school in Rhode Island before moving in with his sister here. He remembers his teachers. "A lot of them were that type that didn't care."

Now he hopes to be a teacher some day.

Kierstin Neveu, 16, was "this close" to dropping out of a Springfield high school. "At least I'm in class here. I'm trying to get somewhere."

Jillian Conant, 17, remembers being distracted in her Springfield high school class by students and teachers who didn't seem to care. Although her mother has been supportive, some have told her she's the problem.

"I like proving people wrong," she says.

VanderMost agrees. "Seventy-five percent of me being here is because I wanted to do something with my life; the other 25 percent is I wanted to say (I could) to all the people who said I couldn't."

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