

The Star-Ledger

Praise for ambitious Rutgers initiative to help disadvantaged youths

Posted by [afriedma](#) June 07, 2009 12:33PM

It's been a year since Rutgers University launched one of the country's most ambitious education experiments, a campaign to change the fortunes of urban teenagers that stands to become a bigger investment within 10 years than a 600-bed dormitory.

Adolescents, their parents and public school administrators uniformly praise the Future Scholars Program. Last June, the initiative started 200 disadvantaged seventh-graders along a five-year path of summer workshops, tutoring, social support and cultural outings. Their reward if they keep a B average and meet other requirements: a full ride to Rutgers.



Photos by Jerry McCrea/The Star-Ledger Celeste Sanchez of Newark, a student at the Miller Street School, tries to control a spinning wheel as part of a lesson in centrifugal force during a reception for Rutgers Future Scholars on Friday.

Members of the inaugural class have argued cases in a mock trial run by a law school dean, practiced solving equations on Saturdays and attended a Broadway show. While there isn't much data yet about the effects -- eighth-grade performance indicates only so much about college chances -- participants are enthusiastic about the program.

Nydirah Stroughn, who attends the K-8 Hawthorne Avenue School in Newark, raised her math grade from a D to an A, landed on the honor roll and became more outgoing. Rutgers University President Richard L. McCormick congratulates the Future Scholars Program's Class of 2018 during the reception.

Alvaro Escalante, who emigrated from El Salvador four years ago, no longer assumes he'll go straight into the work force after high school. They might even meet in a courtroom one day -- Stroughn aspires to be a forensic scientist, and Escalante, tentatively, an attorney.

"The chance to be a Rutgers scholar changed my life completely," Escalante said.

"Before that, I really didn't have anything to look forward to in school."

During the year, the target public schools in the four cities with Rutgers campuses have responded to the challenge. Principal Richard Hueston at Theodore Schor Middle School in Piscataway said the 18 Future Scholars at his school have begun to run in different circles, spending more time with other high-achieving students. Even other kids in the school who are not in the program at the K-8 Hawthorne Avenue School have sought tutoring, said guidance counselor Donna Knight.

"I didn't fight, Ms. Knight; I want to go to college," one student proudly told her.

Rutgers hopes to uncover exactly what kinds of intervention are needed for each student to end up in its hallways, whether it means spending more time on algebra or eating more nutritious meals. Then, more importantly, program staff will utilize services from both Rutgers and community groups gathered under the Future Scholars umbrella.

"We can sit them down with a counselor," said researcher Megan Schramm-Possinger, "but that's not going to change that they don't have enough food."

Such a holistic commitment, said program director Aramis Gutierrez, means Rutgers expects 100 percent of willing program participants to earn a college degree. If so, that would mean hundreds of inner-city families may celebrate their first-ever college graduate.

Of course, such a project, carried out by six full-time staff members, doesn't come cheaply. Courtney McAnuff, the university's vice president of enrollment management, said officials expect to spend \$15 million over five years while the first class works its way through high school. The entire program is supposed to be funded by donations. Supporting one student through his or her college years, according to a research paper by Schramm-Possinger, will cost about \$27,000.

The university raised \$1.2 million in donations during the programs first year, said Michael Marion, a senior director at the Rutgers Foundation. Officials are optimistic that increased awareness of the program -- it will be the next cover story for the alumni magazine, with a readership of 350,000 -- will result in increased donations, even in a down economy.

And if the program becomes a model for the rest of the state and U.S., as its staff plans, Marion said, that will drive more grant funding.

"We are on the right track and are trying to build momentum in a difficult climate," he said.

At a ceremony Friday on the university's Busch campus in Piscataway, Rutgers welcomed members of the second group of Future Scholars. They formed a red sea of T-shirts reading Class of 2018 on the back, and many passed out scarlet bumper stickers to their parents. A standing ovation erupted when alumnus Steven Colson, one of the programs leading donors, announced he would double his original contribution of \$100,000.

Though it's early in the game, the program seems to be on the right track, Schramm-Possinger said. Of the 188 outgoing seventh-graders initially selected for the program, 182 of them completed the first year -- two moved out of state and four didn't complete the weeklong summer program.

A database of student grades and teacher comments shows 80 percent had a GPA of at least 3.0, the threshold asked of them to remain enrolled. Though a detailed report of

their results on an experimental standardized test isn't available yet, Schramm-Possinger said, scores line up with national averages for eighth-graders.



Paul Pinto of Newark, left, a student at the Wilson Avenue School, is covered in wire mesh as Brandon Pereira, a student at the Oliver Street School in Newark, applies low-level static electricity to the mesh during an experiment.

She's also working on measuring less concrete considerations. The Newark students took an 80-question, 50-minute survey this winter. Results showed the kids had better self-esteem and a more positive attitude toward school, she said. Two seemed to perceive low parental support --one, it turned out, because non-English-speaking parents didn't understand the school system well -- and six delivered scores indicating inadequate support from teachers.

And more tests are on the way. Parents yesterday took a survey about how involved they are in their childrens educations, and this summer, 400 students will respond to questions designed to show how racial and ethnic identity affect the way they cope with challenges.

The path to becoming a national blueprint isnt guaranteed, said Stanford University economist and education expert Eric Bettinger.

Selecting promising kids, he said, will make it difficult to ascertain how much of the success is directly linked to the program.

But Bettinger said the Rutgers approach is a reasonable one that could illuminate the poorly understood subject of early interventions for disadvantaged students.

"People are realizing its not enough for us to throw a lot of services at an 11th- or 12th-grader," he said. "They may have already started to embrace a dream or a goal that doesn't involve college."

By putting college at the forefront of their lives, program leaders hope, the students will bring about a future with less crime, less poverty and more intellectual achievement. In the meantime, Gutierrez said, its already created a close-knit group of achievers from a far-flung group attending different schools.

"When they come together," he said, "it's as if they never left each other."