

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

and The Tampa Times

Low In Income, But Soaring In Dedication



Tribune photo by JAY NOLAN

Students Davonte Perry, 12, left, and Kalin Battle, 11, get some studying in before school at Academy Prep Center of Tampa.

Academy Prep Center of Tampa is a rigorous private school getting national attention for turning out academically gifted students.

By MARILYN BROWN
The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA — Before dawn, students begin pulling wheeled backpacks into their 1.9-acre weekday home wedged between a Cuban bakery and a dry cleaner, a scant block from traffic whizzing overhead on Interstate 4 in Ybor City.

The 10- to 14-year-olds in green or white polo shirts and navy pants or skirts mingle or sit on the walkway, propped up against block walls, reading, writing or chatting.

Daylight sneaks in as they shift to green metal benches under a sprawling oak, downing cereal and milk or just socializing. By the time they line up by grade and sex in front of their century-old schoolhouse, it's nearly 7:30 a.m.

"Why aren't you running, son?" headmaster Lincoln Tamayo prods a straggler as the group waits for him to

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The school is free to its students.

THE SCHOOL DAY



Tribune photo by JASON BEHNKEN

Jessica Wilson, 11, right, gets help from Cymone Yarbrough, 11, while she plays chess as an extracurricular activity.

- Starts at 7:05 a.m. with breakfast, brief non-denominational convocation
- Academic subjects vary by day: English, math, science, history, drama, writing, computer lab, science lab, library, 45 to 75 minutes each.
- Lunch: 66 minutes, usually outdoors
- Physical education: 60 to 75 minutes daily; unstructured
- Extracurricular: 75 minutes a day. Chess, step, band, Spanish, art, music, sewing, karate, dance, yoga,

golf, baseball, basketball, drama, gardening, photojournalism, social etiquette, leadership through wilderness experiences, family fitness and nutrition.

• Study hall: An hour with teachers or volunteers required because of grades

• Regular dismissal, 5:05; Study hall, 6:05

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deposit his books and get in line.

Academy Prep Center of Tampa is a free private preparatory school for students from low-income families.

It's on the same mission as the thousands of other public and private schools across the nation struggling with that population — to change lives dramatically through education.

What may be different here is not just the 10- or 11-hour days or the continuous support and follow-up promised students for up to 12 years — including help accessing elite high schools and colleges.

It's also the attitude.

Academy Prep is not pouring time and money into students who don't want to be there or those who won't or can't work hard.

"We wanted to open doors," said Paul Whiting, founder of the Tampa school and head of the board of trustees.

"If they don't want to conform — unlike public schools, we don't have to keep them."

Their low-income families must participate in exchange for intense personal attention lavished on their children, three to four years of small classes, plenty of time for physical education and extras, including drama, music, art, karate and Saturday field trips.

Parents must get their children to and from school, work with the staff and chaperone field trips, help teachers, work the lunch line or wash uniforms.

What they get in return, they say, feels like family.

Staff members show up in their lives in every aspect from custody court hearings to funerals of students' parents.

They find scholarships and keep in constant touch with parents. Once they go to high school, staff members call and e-mail the students' teachers and even visit the students in class.

After breakfast, a short, daily convocation is held in the auditorium.

Students stand in rows, taking part in readings, including a Psalm, short prayer, Pledge of Allegiance and celebration of good news.



Tribune photo by JAY NOLAN

ACADEMY PREP CENTER OF TAMPA

What: A private college prep school for children of low-income families

Where: 1407 E. Columbus Drive, Tampa. Former V.M. Ybor Grammar School

When: Opened summer 2003

Enrollment: 100 students, grades 5-8

Goal: Graduates earn scholarships to premier private high schools and colleges and return to the community as successful adults, mentors and role models.

National affiliation: NativityMiguel Network of Schools

Local affiliation: Academy Prep Center of St. Petersburg

Qualifying: Family qualifies for the federal free and reduced lunch program; student passes a written exam and interview; attends a summer program where final selections are made.

Calendar: August through June with winter and spring breaks

Hours per day: 10 plus one-hour study hall required for those not on honor roll or those who want it. Monthly Saturday field trips.

Funding: Private donations plus \$3,750 each for most students from a Florida voucher program funded with income tax credits for corporations.

Cost per student: \$14,500

Annual budget: \$1.452 million

Student costs: Activity fee of \$15 per month per student for those who can pay.

Staff: 25

Teachers: Eight academic; one drama, one music, two counselors, six AmeriCorps teachers

Teachers' qualifications: All have bachelor's degrees; five teachers and both counselors have master's degrees. Three hold state certification.

Transportation: Family car, walking, HartLine bus

Graduations: 18 from first class of 30 (May 2007)

Where last year's grads are now: Academy of Holy Names, Tampa (2); Cambridge Christian, Tampa (1); Carrollwood Day School (1); Tampa Prep (2); Berkeley Prep, Tampa (1); Tampa Catholic (1); Jesuit High, Tampa (2); Brooks DeBartolo Charter (3); Blake High magnet (1); Middleton Magnet (2); Blue Ridge School, St. George, Va. (1); St. Andrews Sewanee School, Tennessee (1)

Their first semester high school grade point averages: Girls, 3.19; boys, 2.05

Their individual grade point averages first semester of high school: high, 3.57; low, 1.14

Source: Academy Prep Center of Tampa

Then they all recite their school's pledge, which begins: "Standing in this room are the greatest, most committed, most responsible people this world has ever known. If it is to be, it is up to me."

Some Students Wash Out

Of the original 30 students who started at Academy Prep in 2003 as fifth-graders, 18 graduated from eighth grade last May and moved on to three public and nine private schools, two out-of-state.

The 12 who didn't make it either moved, couldn't handle the long days, had behavioral issues or family problems.

Many come with strings of discipline referrals from public schools, "mostly for talking," said Dawn Sokalski, who teaches math to the boys in the sex-separated classes.

Their high energy doesn't bother her.

"We channel it," she said, taking lessons outside, for example. "I let them run in the field and tell them to run a 60-degree angle."

When she assigns problems that don't seem practical, she tells students, "You will use it to get into high school. You will use it to get into college. It will be on an entrance test."

One advantage to working at Academy Prep, she said: "Here I'm not FCAT-bound," referring to Florida's testing program for public schools. Academy Prep does administer nationally normed Stanford 10 reading and math tests and boasts that students do better than the state's public school students on the same test.

Academy Prep's 2007 eighth-graders average percentile rank in reading was 71, compared with the state's 67. In math, Academy Prep eighth graders' average percentile rank was 81, compared with the state's 74.

Hillsborough Schools accountability chief John Hilderbrand said a key difference is that all public school students, including those with disabilities and non-English speaking students, take the test.

Academy Prep doesn't take students with disabilities and it screens carefully, including tests to see if they are on grade level. Interviews are required.

"I look for that spark in their eye. We weed out those who don't want to be there," said Anita M. Wash-Morrow, the school guidance counselor who conducts the interviews. "They're unpolished, but they

have something they were born with."

The final test is a month of classes in June.

Old habits, including fights and disrespectfulness, take time to get under control, and often reappear, particularly after a weekend.

"Mondays are rough here," says Anne Dougherty, graduate support counselor.

Today there is good news for Emmanuel Corujo, a 14-year-old who will graduate from eighth grade in May. He is being awarded a full scholarship, including books and uniforms, to Tampa Catholic High School.

Emmanuel's mother, Anna Rodriguez, beams proudly as her son's award is announced during the morning's assembly. Later, the single mother struggles for words to describe her hope, "That he can find a good job — that he can be somebody."

Of the 19 others in Emmanuel's class on track to graduate in May, most already have offers to attend Academy of Holy Names, Jesuit, Florida Air Academy in Melbourne, Culver Academy in Indiana, Blue Ridge School in Virginia and Blake High School's magnet program for the arts.

Five have applied to the elite Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, where families usually pay more than \$36,000 a year and the school draws on its endowment to cover the more than \$63,000 it spends per student.

"You take yourself to a whole other limit," said 14-year-old Imani Smith, as she reverently pulled a large Exeter recruiting folder from her backpack.

Homeless for a year, Imani attended Metropolitan Ministries, a charter school for homeless families. Her mother, Ebony Smith, then enrolled Imani in Academy Prep and returned to school herself, earning an associate's degree and certification as a medical assistant.

Imani had never heard of Exeter until a recruiter came to Tampa Prep. Her goal is to attend high school there, starting this summer.

"If she does four years at Exeter, she's going to have chances to get into Ivy League colleges — which is what I

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Work is hard, hours long.



Tribune photo by JAY NOLAN

Academy Prep Center takes an intensive approach to academics and family participation. School days are long, and students' parents volunteer to keep their children on track.



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Whiting
Founder wanted to give low-income students chance to excel.

want for her," her mother said. Academy Prep furnishes luggage, clothes and airfare for students, including returning home for breaks, all paid by donors and an endowment.

Not all transitions into Academy Prep go smoothly.

Denise Duggins, a pre-kindergarten teacher herself and mother of four, said her 11-year-old twin sons were 'A' students in public schools, but have struggled in their first year at Academy Prep. She volunteers nearly every day to help keep her sons on track.

"It's a challenge," she said, but well worth it. "They treat your child as if they're family. It's a home away from home."

One of the twins, De-Montre Moore, said, "The work is harder, but we get to do more activities." His goal is to be a doctor and football player.

Post-Academy Life An Adjustment

Dougherty visits the 2007 graduates in their public and private high school classes, including those out-of-state. Some struggle with the lack of daily support they were used to, bigger schools or no longer being the upperclassmen, counselors said.

Of last year's eighth graders, three had less than a C average their first semester of high school.

Two of those are in Hillsborough public schools. Six had at least B averages.

Aerial Reese, had a solid B average first semester at the private Tampa Prep High school after three years at Academy Prep.

When she arrived at Academy Prep in sixth grade, "I didn't know how to write at all" and didn't like to read

She learned that and more, she said: "How to become a better person, how to become

a better student, how to appreciate things."

Billy Gaines, now 14 and a ninth grader at Tampa's Brooks DeBartolo Charter School, is one of seven children raised by his grandmother. He said he had tough time adjusting to Academy Prep when he entered in fifth grade.

"I wanted to leave - they wouldn't let me," Gaines said. "My principal wouldn't have let that happen. He said he sees something in me. I said, 'I can't see what you're seeing.'"

Gaines said he even tried to fail his classes, but "It didn't work. All my teachers really cared about me. Then I started to get the hang of it."

The work was hard, he said, and so were the hours: "You go to school when it's dark and you come home when it's dark. You do your homework, eat, take a shower and go to bed."

Without the experience, "I'd be getting into fights, not know what to do and when to do it," he said.

Responsibility is woven into the school day, including no bells to signal class changes.

"It's part of the real world in terms of the virtue of meeting your schedule," headmaster Tamayo said.

Besides its regular teachers and counselors, the Tampa school enlists AmeriCorps volunteers as teachers. Fresh from college, they earn a stipend from the government, money for grad school or to pay off student loans.

They also get free housing in apartments on the second floor of Academy Prep's two new classroom buildings.

Bill Schramm, a recent Notre Dame psychology grad, teaches physical education and golf.

He said he plans to sign up for another year before going to law school because he is so impressed with headmaster Tamayo, who he describes as "definitely the leader, definitely a parent, too."

Tamayo is described by par-

ents, students and staff as both driving force and daily inspiration for the school.

Volunteers Vital To School

Among the resources are community volunteers such as Jordan Rashid, a senior at Jesuit High, who helps students during the final hour of study hall three days a week.

"It's been eye-opening to me," he says. "Not everyone in America is as well off as we think they are."

The staff has impressed him: "I never realized the human capacity to love that much, especially not their own children."

Another volunteer, mortgage broker and former Notre Dame football player James Dillard, also ends his day at the school.

"There are days they get on my nerves and I let 'em know," he said as the students head out the door.

But "It helps me appreciate the structure, discipline I've had in my life."

It's after 6 p.m. now, and those who walk have mostly headed home.

Some, like, Savion Lang, 11, have already taken the HART-Line bus. He leaves about 5, a long enough day for him, he says, and "probably the reason I get good grades."

Others call 'goodnight' as



Tribune photo by JAY NOLAN

Students eat breakfast, beginning a long day of academics, studying and extracurricular activities such as karate and dramatics.



Tribune photo by JASON BEHNKEN

Teacher Amy Humboldt waits with students as they wait for rides. Some students arrive at 6:45 a.m. and don't leave until 6:00 p.m.



Tribune photo by JASON BEHNKEN

Volunteer James Dillard, left, works with students during study hall. Study hall is required for all students not on the honor roll.

they drag their backpacks to cars.

In just minutes, daylight has highlighted, then left, the top branches of the oak in darkness.

Street lights have popped on and the interstate has trans-

formed into a blaze of red and white streaks.

At 6:15, the last parent pulls in to pick up her two daughters.

In less than 13 hours, the students return.

