

Schools in the News

Open Meadow & Roosevelt STEP UP program helped Freshmen succeed

By Susan W. Clark

Good things are happening at Roosevelt High School. Reading and math skills are climbing; students at risk of dropping out of their freshman year stayed in school and they even smile when they talk about the STEP UP Program; one of six programs operated by Open Meadow, a North Portland, private, non-profit, educational organization.

"I was a gangbanger, and we all had bad attitudes," said Zach Nold, one of three 14-year-old STEP UP freshmen who gathered to discuss how the program had changed their lives. Zach attended Open Meadow Middle School, while Debbie Long and Laquisha Minnieweather attended George Middle School. All three are now students of POWER Academy at Roosevelt.

Open Meadow STEP UP program at Roosevelt was funded last year by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program and this year by Title I funds, as well as a generous multi-year grant from Comcast Foundation. The public-private partnership is making some remarkable changes and probably literally saving lives. The Comcast grant has enabled Open Meadow to expand enrollment in STEP UP, to serve youth not eligible under NCLB and to equip computer labs in each of the three academies at Roosevelt.

STEP UP youth are generally referred to the program by their middle school teachers and counselors as being particularly challenged by the transition to high school.

"Each STEP UP student does two hours of tutoring each week, but also uses tutoring time for connecting, talking over problems, issues at home, and deciding how to overcome problems," said STEP UP staff member Marty Ruybalid. "We try to focus on doing what will support each student's ability to reach their potential in school. We do groups focused on issues and they really help the youth know they are not alone."

The program has twelve tutor/advocates who work with about twelve RHS students. They have been able to support 44% of RHS freshmen plus twenty-six sophomores with an array of services that include:

- Leadership camps, one week long, held in June or July
- Summer tutoring
- After-school academic support
- Leadership development, year round
- Parent or guardian support
- Community involvement opportunities
- Peer mentorship, each freshman paired with an older student

In the summer leadership camp, the ropes course made a big impression. Laquisha remembers finding it very scary, but her team wouldn't let her quit. Debbie was able to face the heights of the ropes course with bravery. Both remember their accomplishments with pride.

STEP UP's measures of success go well beyond student appreciation. One hundred percent of participants in the 2004

summer leadership camp were still enrolled in school at the end of their freshman year a major achievement for the students and the staff, since the participants were those identified most likely to drop out during their first year in high school.

The STEP UP students who were tutored in math showed nearly two grade levels of gain on standardized tests. Those tutored in reading gained over one grade level, well above the RHS average gain. Even more impressive, the summer leadership camp participants who were also tutored in reading gained even more than those STEP UP participants receiving only tutoring accomplished.

When asked about how STEP UP has impacted them, Laquisha's face lights up and Debbie explains a project the two young women worked on, saying, "A lot of ninth graders don't understand math, especially algebra, so we made up problems that relate to things kids care about." The problems are being turned into a supplemental math book that will be shared with math teachers at RHS and Open Meadow. This project was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Youth Innovation Fund.

Laquisha describes another achievement STEP UP has supported, "My tutor helped me apply to be a youth commissioner. I'll get to give my opinion about things like abortion and other issues that effect youth. My tutor is my piano teacher, too, and helped me go to Hip Hop Hope Camp on Whidbey Island. I even

made a CD," she said, obviously thrilled that music is a big part of her life.

"STEP UP helped me get better grades and not be in so much trouble with teachers," Debbie said. She admitted to having been a major challenge to teachers before joining STEP UP. Part of the STEP UP approach is meetings between the tutor and each student to review grades and talk about what could be

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STEP UP students Debbie Long, Laquisha Minnieweather and Zach Nold.

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done to improve grades in the next term.

Zach said, "In middle school I had straight F's and I was doing real bad and now I have above a three point. My tutor pays real close attention and he helps. He's like my brother from another mother." All three youth laugh a little self-consciously.

Although their freshman year is nearly over, these STEP UP youth have the choice to continue next year as peer mentors and another year of tutoring. To become peer mentors they would complete a three-day training before the camp for new freshmen, but they would also have to be realistic about how much time they could give to peer

mentoring. Zach isn't sure he can do it, because he will have a job this summer and football practice. He also lifts weights every day. Debbie and Laquisha both think they'll try peer mentoring.

As representatives of STEP UP's accomplishments, Debbie, Zach, and Laquisha couldn't offer a more positive picture of turning young lives around. With the right intervention and help from Open Meadow STEP UP, those least likely to become sophomores now have the confidence to step out successfully.

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