



TRIBUNE PHOTO: JIM CLARK

"I want to get my MBA and go to NYU. ... I want to do basically the same thing (Jay-Z's) doing."

— Vinnie Spilman

Students step up to challenge

Front Page, Portland
Tribune
9/5/06

Program for at-risk kids inspires them to stick with it, succeed

By JENNIFER ANDERSON
The Tribune

Two years ago, Vinnie Spilman was one of the kids at George Middle School who always seemed to get into trouble, he admits.

He didn't like going to class, didn't take school seriously and didn't like listening to anyone, much less his teachers.

Wednesday, the 15-year-old will enter his sophomore year as one of the top-ranked kids at North Portland's Roosevelt High School. Not only did he stun his parents with a 3.6 grade-point average last year, he also played football and basketball and is aiming for a perfect 4.0 GPA this year.

It's all part of his plan to achieve his long-held dream.

"I want to be a businessman," said Spilman, who likes to be called by his middle name, Dewayne. "I want to get my MBA and go to NYU. Jay-Z is my favorite rapper. He's in New York, and I want to do basically the same thing he's doing. He's the president of Def Jam (Recordings). I want to own my own thing."

Spilman said the importance of succeeding in school just clicked one day, the summer after his eighth-grade year, while he was engaged in an activity as part of a program called Step Up.

Run by Open Meadow Middle School and offered to kids at nearby George and Portsmouth middle schools, Step Up was created three years ago to address the high dropout rate at North Portland high schools. From middle school, the program continues with tutoring, mentoring and other support for high school freshmen at risk of dropping out. Statistics show that most dropouts happen that first year.

But a new report on Step Up's progress shows that none of last year's 351 participants dropped out. Over the program's history, just a small handful have dropped out, Hanif Fazal, the program's director, said.

Forty former participants are on track to graduate from high school this year. Four of them already have full-ride scholarships to universities, provided by individual donors. In fact, the Step Up kids are not only succeeding at school; they're doing *better* than their counterparts at Roosevelt who are not involved in Step Up, statistics show.

"This isn't like magical stuff," said Andrew Mason, Open

See STEP / Page 3

Step: Roosevelt High sees clear improvement

■ From page 1

Meadow's executive director. "It's just like doing good relationships with kids and funding it appropriately."

Funding comes from the city's Children Investment Fund and a mix of grants.

The program could now expand to other high schools that face some of the same problems as Roosevelt: low enrollment, low achievement and various socio-economic challenges. Mason said the new principal of the Jefferson Campus, Leon Dudley, met with him recently to inquire about starting up sometime this school year.

At Roosevelt, it has made a huge impact, administrators said.

"Students have told us, 'Wow, even the bad students want to be good,'" said Deborah Peterson, campus principal at Roosevelt, which is in its third year of being split into three small schools to personalize the learning environment.

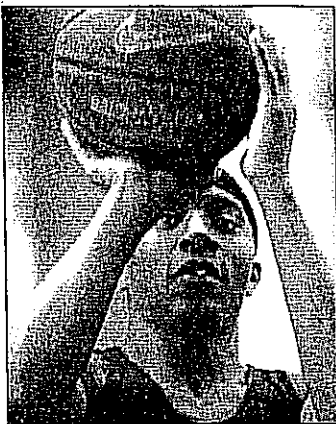
"We've worked to change the environment from a casual place to a place where if you don't show up for class, we're looking for you, calling your home," Peterson said. "The kids love it and say, 'Man, you're always in my business.' We say, 'Yeah, we are.'"

Reforms move up line

With so much focus on the re-configuration of elementary and middle schools this summer — in part to improve academic performance at the middle school level — attention is now turning to high school performance in Portland.

Specifically, Superintendent Vicki Phillips made it clear last spring that she will be tracking the reforms at Roosevelt, Marshall, Madison and Jefferson. If those high schools don't improve both academic achievement and enrollment in two or three years, she said, the decision to keep the schools as they are will be revisited.

The gains through Step Up have helped propel Roosevelt's students to the top, Peterson said.



TRIBUNE PHOTO: JIM CLARK

Vinnie Spilman, 15, a Step Up participant who will be a sophomore at Roosevelt this fall, was a two-sport athlete with a 3.6 GPA last year.

Created in 1971, the Kenton-based Open Meadow Alternative School is one of Portland Public Schools' oldest alternative programs, serving students who haven't succeeded in the traditional school setting. Step Up enrolls those most at-risk students, selected by their teachers or counselors.

Beginning in seventh grade and continuing through 10th, an adult advocate or mentor meets with the student regularly during the school year for tutoring and other help with life choices.

The advocate talks with the student's parents every couple of weeks to touch base and calls when the student misses a session. The student's teachers are kept in the loop during meetings every few weeks with Step Up staff. Once they reach 10th grade, students can be a peer mentor to younger ones.

The cornerstone of the program, Mason said, is a summer camp before the freshman year that involves guided conversations about dreams, a ropes course, board-breaking and other activities that help kids realize their potential.

The Step Up kids are largely from poor families, and may have had problems with family issues, drugs, alcohol, crime or mental health. They're nearly evenly split among blacks, Hispanics and

whites. Fifty-six percent of the participants last year were female.

"These are kids who need to find hope; they're hurt in a lot of ways," Mason said. "It's really connecting with what do they want to do and why do they want to go to school in the first place."

Roosevelt makes gains

Peterson said she knows Phillips is looking hard at high school performance, but she insisted that scrutiny has not been the driving force behind the improvements at Roosevelt — it's coming from within.

"It came from inside meetings, research, a lot of intense work," she said.

The recent federal ratings under the No Child Left Behind law rank Roosevelt's overall academic achievement at a "low" level, but that is higher than the "unacceptable" it received the previous two years.

Students showed the biggest gains in writing, a slight improvement in reading and a drop in math.

"We're not where we want to be," Peterson said.

As for enrollment, the number has held steady, with 770 students this year. She'd like to boost that, and offers tours of the campus every Wednesday at 8 a.m. for prospective students and their families.

For the improvements that have been made, Peterson credits the 15 community partners working with students on evenings, weekends, and before and after school to help them succeed. Along with Step Up, they include the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement, the Urban League of Portland, the International Refugee Center of Oregon and Self Enhancement Inc.

According to Peterson, a significant number of the school's students are homeless, so these social service agencies provide everything from tutoring and counseling to clothing, school supplies and food support.

jenniferanderson@
portlandtribune.com