

Love Of Learning Is On Track With Black Students

Davidson, NC - Don't be surprised if you visit the Davidson College campus on a sultry summer afternoon and find 13 black teenagers jotting down meters per second as their classmates take turns running a 40-meter course marked off along the service road beside the Dana Science Building.

What may seem like an unusual exercise on a hot July day is a carefully planned lesson in calculating velocity and acceleration. Using the campus as an outdoor lab, physics teacher Kara Gilmore is trying to make abstract principles come alive for her students, all 12th graders participating in the month-long Love of Learning program at Davidson.

"I want to make physics less intimidating," says Ms. Gilmore, a 1985 Davidson graduate who has taught physics and chemistry at Charlotte Latin school for the past two years. "I'm planning a lot of hands-on activity and lab investigations to show how physical processes work."

Kara Gilmore typifies what Love of Learning Director Brenda Tapia looks for in every instructor involved in this innovative, educational support program for black high school students.

"You want teachers who are full of energy, creative, who love what they're doing, because they stimulate love of learning in their students," says Ms. Tapia. "Their students remember them years later. Some of them choose careers in teaching because a special teacher has touched them."

Alarmed by the shrinking numbers of black students enrolling in college, Davidson officials launched Love of Learning last summer as a pilot project to identify "diamonds in the rough" -- talented black students who might not otherwise aspire to college careers and help them develop the skills, motivation and self-esteem they need to succeed in college.

Begun with 29 11th graders last summer, this year's program expanded to include 31 ninth graders and 22 12th graders from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System. Love of Learning stresses early intervention, identifying promising minority students in the eighth grade and involving them in a five-year sequential program of summer and academic-year experiences.

Thomas Kirkley, a senior at West Charlotte High School, is in his second year with the Love of Learning program. This summer, he feels more comfortable with the other kids, knows his way around campus and is even more convinced of the program's value than he was at the outset.

"My SAT scores went from 770 to 1,060 after last summer, and I hope they'll go up again when I take the test in August," he said. "We have fun while we're learning, we get a head start on tough subjects like calculus, and best of all, we're like brothers and sisters -- we help each other out when there's something we don't understand."

For Kisha Davis, a ninth grader at Harding High school in Charlotte, this is her first experience with life on a college campus, but she's determined it won't be her last.

"I want to go to college," she says, "and this program gives me a chance to see what college is all about, as well as brush up on my greatest weakness -- algebra!"

A typical day in the life of a Love of Learning participant includes classes in math, English and science, physical education, SAT test preparation, leadership training and a study period in the college library.

Although it's a long, intensive day -- with activities scheduled from 8:45 a.m. to 9 p.m. -- time is set aside for social activities like picnics, dances and trips to Carowinds and to the Afro-American Cultural Center in Charlotte.

Despite the rigorous schedule, Ms. Tapia doesn't expect to find students falling asleep in class.

"All the teachers will try to connect concepts learned in the classroom to the kids' lives and career interests," she says. "Classroom material will include thumbnail biographies of famous blacks who have excelled in their particular disciplines."

Love of Learning participants will also get plenty of "hands-on" experience with computers. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system has loaned the program 15 computers to supplement equipment available at Davidson.

Although academic skills are emphasized, the most important goal of the program is to build self-esteem, or as Ms. Tapia likes

to describe it -- to "turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones." Twelve Davidson students work as counselors with the Love of Learning program to overcome one big stumbling block - the notion that a high academic achiever is a nerd.

"We try to show these kids that you can do well academically and still be fun and popular," explains Ms. Tapia.

She's delighted by the fact that at least a dozen members of the pilot groups of students have expressed an interest in enrolling at Davidson. That's a promising sign that Love of Learning is right on track toward its long-range goal: to encourage students to enroll in college, go on to graduate school and pursue careers in teaching.



Photo: Mike Hood

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Ninth Graders Lakesha Crawford, Northeast Junior High; and Darryl Hart, Alexander Graham Junior High.

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