

Out of the Miasma

By Alan Gottlieb

Colorado I Have a Dream & College Summit Help Kids Find Their Way

In the through-the-looking-glass world of urban public education, it's not always possible to move struggling students to a new school, or a new classroom, where they might be more challenged and better served. No, sometimes it's necessary for outside groups to find promising students who are wandering lost in the miasma of educational mediocrity and provide them with the tools they need to climb to higher ground.

A handful of such programs with proven track records exist across the country. In Colorado, two in particular are making inroads. The Colorado I Have a Dream Foundation and College Summit are demonstrating that with the proper supports, low-income students who might otherwise languish and drop out can make it through high school and succeed in college.

Both programs build those supports on a foundation of strong relationships between students and caring adults.

"It's all about relationships. I can't stress that enough," said Mary Hanewell, Colorado I Have a Dream executive director. "Each child must have a relationship with at least one adult they trust, who has high expectations for that child, and states that to him or her over and over again."

Colorado I Have a Dream

Oumar showed up at Denver's Montclair Elementary School one day in 2000, a shy, skinny nine-year-old. He spoke fluent French, Susu and Fulani – tongues of his native Guinea -- but not a word of English. He landed in a fifth-grade classroom, where he was the youngest child. Things could have been rough for Oumar. But he was lucky: the subsidized apartment building where he lived with his parents and younger sister had been adopted by the Colorado I Have a Dream Foundation.

Beginning the day he entered Montclair until he graduates from George Washington High School in 2008, Oumar will be surrounded by a network of academic and social support aimed at getting him to graduation and beyond.

"Basically, right from the start, they sent me straight toward my goals," Oumar, now a 15-year-old high school junior, said recently in flawless English. "I didn't know anything about colleges here, or high schools even. I am who I am today because of this program."

Oumar today is an honor student with a 4.0 grade point average. He intends to go to a four-year college in the fall of 2008. He would be the first member of his family to attend college. He has his eyes on Bucknell University, Drake College, the University of Denver, and Colorado College.

Since its inception in 1988, Colorado I Have a Dream has served over 450 low-income, at-risk Denver-area youth. The program adopts a third-grade class and provides services to those children until they graduate from high school. Those who decide to attend college also receive a \$2,000 per-year scholarship. Each adopted class has a sponsor or group of sponsors who commit to supporting the class financially through its 10 years in the program. Sponsors have ranged from individuals to corporations to foundations.

According to organization officials, Colorado I Have a Dream participants who have completed the program have graduated from high school at rates more than double those of their peers. College matriculation rates are between three and six times the norm for demographically similar Colorado students not involved in the program.

The secret, Executive Director Hanewall said, is a wide array of services offered to the students. These include intensive and ongoing tutoring, one-on-one mentoring (though a woeful shortage of male mentors hampers this aspect of the program), six weeks of structured and educational summer activities, community service projects, and after-school programs.

Sara Symons has been the project coordinator for Oumar's 42-student class for the past six years. The class consists primarily of African American and African-immigrant children. As project coordinator, Symons involves herself intimately in the life of each student's family. The first year of the adoption she spoke with students' parent or parents once a week on average. Now that they know her and the program well, they speak on average once a month. "I work really hard at fostering a relationship with the parents, so that when things aren't going well for their kid, we have the relationship to fall back on," Symons said.

College Summit

Denver East High School graduate J.B. Schramm started College Summit in 1993, laboring over college applications with four students in the basement of a low-income housing project in Washington D.C.

Today, the program works with students in 15 school districts across the country, including Mapleton Public Schools in suburban Denver, which has adopted College Summit district-wide.

College Summit operates from a simple premise: many low-income students, even those in the mid-tier of academic ability, could attend college if they had someone to help them through the often confusing and intimidating application process. Many middling middle-class students go to college because they have college educated parents who know how to navigate these shoals.

But for low-income kids, applying to college often seems impossible.

In its first 10 years, College Summit operated a Peer Leader model, in which selected students attended an intensive four-day summer workshop on a college campus immediately before starting their senior year of high school. These students then received intensive support through the application process. This included signing up and taking required tests, like the SAT and ACT, writing essays, and dealing with financial aid forms.

Seventy-nine percent of Peer Leaders attended college, nearly double the college-going rate of low-income students nationwide. And their retention rate in college has held steady at 80 percent.

Still, program leaders felt they could do more. Since 2003, College Summit has broadened its scope to adopt entire senior classes. As part of this strategy, advisory teachers at each school are trained to act as de facto guidance counselors, significantly increasing a school's capacity to provide meaningful college application services to its students.

Mapleton Public Schools saw the value of College Summit and adopted it across the district starting in 2004. Although the first year was rocky, with some kids and teachers not fully understanding the value of the program, it has become a powerful tool in the past year.

The impact during the 2005-06 school year was striking, according to Supt. Charlotte Ciancio. In 2004-05, the Mapleton Education Foundation earmarked \$20,000 for college scholarships, but found takers for only \$16,000. In 2005-06, when College Summit had kicked in, the foundation gave away \$50,000 in scholarships and had to turn away some applicants.

Nationally, the new Senior Class Model is showing meaningful increases in college-going rates, according to Stephanie Kehrer, College Summit Manager of Strategic Services. Between Year One and Year Two of the program, participating high schools saw a statistically significant increase in college enrollment rates school-wide, based on external data from college registrars, she said. The exact figures weren't yet available.

The program isn't cheap – Mapleton is spending \$60,000 per year on its implementation. "Yes, it is an expensive program," Ciancio said. "But it's a far greater expense to our community if our kids don't attend college. So we think it's worth it."

For further information on these programs, visit their websites:

Colorado I Have A Dream Foundation

www.cihadf.org
College Summit
www.collegesummit.org