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Conservative Spotlight: Providence-St. Mel

by Mary Ellen Burke
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Many hard-working Americans displeased with the blight of urban public school systems don't hesitate before turning to other options for their children to receive a quality education. But for low-income families, who can't afford most private schools, their children can end up at less-than-mediocre public schools with chalk-less classrooms and smoke-filled bathrooms.

An alternative is **Providence-St. Mel**, an independent K-12 college preparatory school located in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Chicago, and attended by black students. The school is considered an model for achieving excellence in education.

"We expect our students to be successful," Jeanette DiBella, the school's principal, told an audience at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., earlier this month. "If you're going to Providence, you're going to college."

The school is on Chicago's West side—an area with the highest national crime rate in 2001—and caters mostly to students (about 75%) who live within a five-mile radius.

"When you have that situation," said DiBella, "the psychology of our school has to be greater and more enticing than the psychology of the streets."

Providence-St. Mel has a 100% college attendance rate among its 600 students and 50% are accepted to top-tier and Ivy League colleges.

The faculty upholds high academic expectations and stringent enforcement of its rules. Once enrolled, students must maintain at least a 2.0 grade average.

Failure to meet this requirement results in extended school services, special tutoring and sometimes "work detention," which involves cleaning the building on a Saturday. Students struggling to keep up with the pace participate in the third semester option, a program similar to summer school.

ACT scores at Providence last year averaged 23 (the national average was 19) and students scored in the 72nd percentile on the Terra Nova assessment test. About 50 students are enrolled in the 10 advanced-placement classes offered at the school, and graduating students received a total of roughly \$2 million in scholarships last year.

"When our students leave Providence-St. Mel, they are competitive, focused, disciplined and successful," said Paul J. Adams III, president of Providence-St. Mel. "We don't lower our standards for our children—we treat each and every one of them like the future leaders they are."

Even kindergarteners that will walk down the stage in 2017 are told from the start that they will attend college.

"They know that they want to get a 'scholar-lip.' They don't know what a 'scholar-lip' is," DiBella said, "but

they know it makes the high school kids really excited.”

Students have gone on to be doctors, lawyers, judges, entrepreneurs, computer engineers, professional athletes and educators.

Adams, a former member of President Ronald Reagan’s Advisory Council on the Office of Private Sector Initiatives, turned to education in 1974 when he became principal of Providence. He fought to keep the school open when the Archdiocese of Chicago moved to close the school. He bought the building from the sisters of Providence.

The school is run on an instructional model in which DiBella, with her 27 years experience in urban education, holds teachers accountable for the model they are supposed to be demonstrating daily.

“When the bell rings, they’ve got to be outside greeting the students as they walk into the classroom, and teaching what they say they’re going to teach,” said DiBella.

Teachers are paid on “demonstrated contribution,” or merit pay, and are encouraged to constantly evaluate what they are doing to increase student performance.

Every student at Providence-St. Mel receives financial aid. It costs the school more than \$10,000 to educate a child, according to Adams, but the school charges only \$5,000. Full-time staff members raise \$3.5 million each year from private donors and organizations in order to keep the school affordable. Financial aid varies based on need, but a minimum payment of \$50 per month is required.

“The point of the school is to educate those students who could not afford private education,” said Adams. Adams does not support the welfare mentality and believes strongly that no one should receive a free education. Parents sign a contract at the beginning of the year, agreeing to the school’s payment policies.

“It’s tough but it works,” said DiBella. “The parents come in on tuition day and pull out their pennies if that’s what they have, and they pay the bill.”

Looking ahead to the future, Adams has discussed with Chicago Mayor Richard Daley the possibility of opening charter schools next year, using the same instructional model as Providence but with federally funded money.

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