

TCHS mentor program proves successful as first group of mentees set to graduate

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By Samantha Costa/The Times

TRENTON — In June, like many other graduates, Jawaun Washington, 18, will toss his cap in the air and celebrate his hard work, defying predictions early in his high school days that he wouldn't make it.

Washington is one of 36 Trenton Central High School seniors who were found in their eighth- or ninth-grade year to be at risk for dropping out.

With the odds stacked against him, Washington overcame the statistics surrounding the dismal dropout rate at TCHS. Now he is planning his college career.

Washington had been selected through a recruitment day offered at TCHS to participate in the Trenton Leaders of Tomorrow mentor program, which is run by a group of nonprofit organizations in Mercer County. Since its inception three years ago, the mentor program has paired at-risk freshmen with a junior mentor and an adult mentor, and altogether assisted more than 300 students.

Of the 36 kids in the first class of mentees who are now seniors, 34 will not only graduate but also will go to college, and two will join the military.

Washington said mentors offer words of wisdom on sensitive topics relating to health, abuse, social skills, and how to deal with everyday stress.

"I've actually learned a lot being here — about life," Washington said.

He transferred to TCHS from Capital Preparatory Charter High School and said he had a difficult time adjusting. During his sophomore year, he was taking home C's.

"But I never considered dropping out," Washington said.

Now, he's applying to several colleges throughout the state to pursue a degree in sociology, he said.

Washington wants to be an inspiration for people who give up in high school.

According to the United Way of Greater Mercer County, 50 percent of Trenton Central High School students don't graduate on time and 40 percent drop out by their sophomore year.



United Youth Mentor Link program at Trenton Central High School - Adult mentor Patrick Hall, 2nd from left, a graduate of TCHS discusses recycling projects with students from left, Dennisse Calle, Danica Bradley & Bruce Graham. Michael Mancuso/The Times

“It doesn’t matter if it’s inner city or in the suburbs. Mentorship programs work in all cases, everywhere,” said Herbert Klein, president and CEO of the local United Way.

Klein said one-on-one personal attention and real trust between mentors and mentees is what really works.

TCHS West student mentor Lauren Johnson, 19, said she knows there are distractions in and out of school, but she doesn’t let them stand in her way.

“I see a lot of kids going in the wrong direction,” said Johnson, a mentor who was paired with an at-risk student. “We actually make a difference.”

Johnson has been accepted into The College of New Jersey and Rutgers University, but she really wants to go to Cornell University or Howard University.

In addition to the student mentors, there are as many as 20 adult mentors including city resident and 1981 TCHS graduate Patrick Hall, 48.

Hall said he was heavily involved in athletics during his high school career, but, he said, he never felt like he had enough guidance to pursue anything beyond a high school diploma.

Eventually, he found his niche in the electronics repair business, and is now a successful businessman. He tells students they can do anything they put their mind to.

“I decided I didn’t like the situations that were happening in Trenton,” he said.

“My favorite part about helping is getting them to open up and be creative and getting them to think.”

ATTENDING RETREAT

In April, the students will go to Princeton University’s Princeton-Blairstown Center in Hardwick Township for a four-day camp-style retreat.

They’ll take part in team-building and learn conflict-resolution skills.

“It’s about the kids getting the most value out of the program,” said Carol Christofferson, the center’s director of development.

United Way reports that only one member of the Trenton Leaders of Tomorrow has withdrawn from school in three years while 90 percent of student mentors graduated on time, and 97 percent of those mentors reported that they found the program to be highly successful in helping them remain focused on graduating from high school.

The program also said that many of the graduating seniors are looking forward to attending prestigious colleges including Rider University, Rutgers University, TCNJ, Virginia State University or Ithaca University, to name a few. One student is awaiting acceptance from Brown University.

In addition to the United Way of Greater Mercer County and the Princeton Blairstown Center, other nonprofit organizations that have a hand in the youth mentor program at TCHS are Big Brothers Big Sisters, which creates mentoring matches of students; Princeton Center for Leadership Training, which trains student mentors; and Leadership Trenton, which recruits adult mentors.

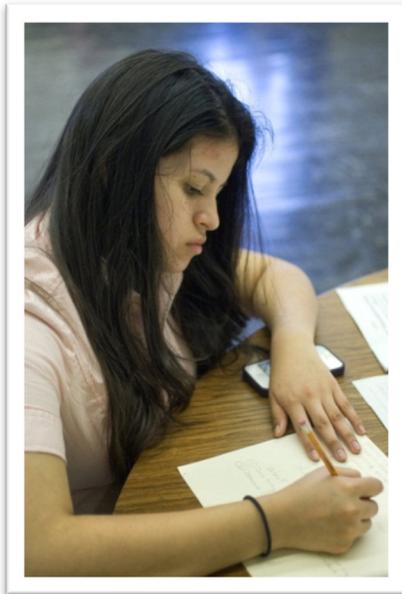
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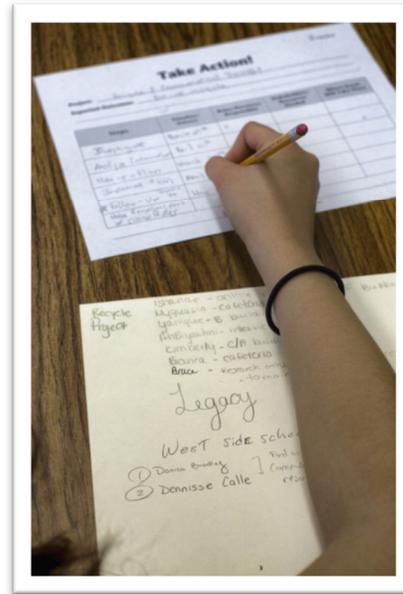
Program manager Ariel Matos gives directions prior to the start of a mentoring session on Tuesday, March 14, 2012.
Michael Mancuso/The Times



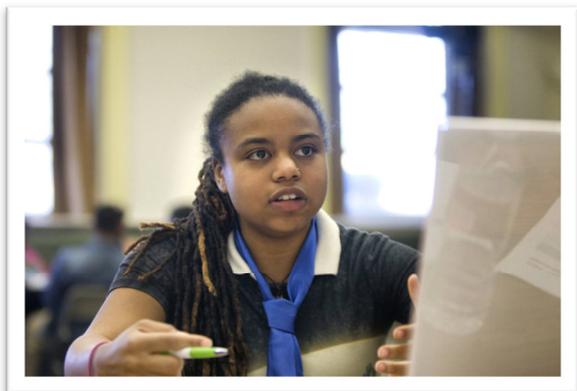
Students in a roundtable group, from left, Karem Mathiang, X-Evier Pegues, Lauren "Joy" Johnson and Wilhemina Minney with Christine Harris, project director from the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. *Michael Mancuso/The Times*



TCHS student Dennisse Calle takes notes during a roundtable session on recycling. *Michael Mancuso/The Times*



TCHS student Dennisse Calle takes notes during a roundtable session on recycling. *Michael Mancuso/The Times*



Trenton Central High School student Lauren "Joy" Johnson participates in a discussion at a United Youth Mentor Link program at Trenton Central High School. *Michael Mancuso/ The Times*



Trenton Central High School student Wilhemina Minney listens to Christine Harris, project director from the Princeton Center for Leadership Training in a discussion at a United Youth Mentor Link program at Trenton Central High School. *Michael Mancuso/The Times*



Adult mentor Patrick Hall, 2nd from left, a graduate of TCHS discusses recycling projects with students from left, Dennisse Calle, Danica Bradley & Bruce Graham. *Michael Mancuso/The Times*