

Philadelphia Inquirer

Oct. 21, 2009

HEADLINE: Students at 4 Philadelphia schools to get college boost

By Kristen A. Graham
Inquirer Staff Writer

If it's successful, a new program to be announced today will create a "college-going culture" in four Philadelphia high schools where few students now graduate and go on to universities.

The five-year program targets all ninth and 10th graders at Benjamin Franklin, Roxborough, Kensington Creative and Performing Arts, and Kensington International Business High Schools, about 1,500 students in all. Organizers of the Citi Postsecondary Success Program hope to boost by 10 percent the number of students from those schools enrolling in postsecondary schools.

Just 10 percent of those who entered the Philadelphia School District in 1997-98 graduated with a bachelor's or associate's degree. For the district's Class of 2005, the percentage of students who went on to colleges varied widely, from 13 percent to 86 percent.

The district could not immediately say what percentage of students at the four targeted high schools went on to college in 2005.

Carol Fixman - executive director of the Philadelphia Education Fund, the group coordinating the work - said the program would coordinate services currently offered, examine data, and fill in service gaps where necessary.

Currently, a handful of programs - including White Williams Scholars, GEAR UP, Philadelphia Academies, and the education fund's own College Access Program - offer similar support to a limited number of students. The programs can take students on college visits, provide them with mentors, tutoring, and financial-aid advice, and help them with applications.

The Postsecondary Success Program will target entire grades at the high schools and encourage its partners to avoid duplicating services, Fixman said.

"There are quite a variety of interesting nonprofits and collaborative efforts - some of them are focused on how do you fill out the college application, some of them are focused on planning the financials," said Pam Flaherty, president of the Citi Foundation, which is bankrolling most of the project. "One of the missing ingredients is coordination among all these different players."

It's important to target not just the brightest youngsters, but all students, Fixman said.

"In our minds, it's the only way to create a college-going culture," she said. "If you go into an affluent school, I daresay going to college is an expectation for everyone. We'd like that to be the case in city schools as well."

Nationally, the Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Miami-Dade districts were selected to participate and will share ideas throughout the five-year process.

About \$5 million in seed money comes from the Citi Foundation, the nonprofit arm of Citigroup and Citi Holdings, the financial-services company. Of those funds, \$600,000 will go directly to the Philadelphia Education Fund, which also must raise matching funds locally.

The program also provides \$1.5 million to a nonprofit that will track data - such as college matriculation rates, attendance, and SAT participation - in all three cities.

Principals at each school already have begun sharing ideas about what a comprehensive program

should look like, Fixman said. The effort for the 1,500 Philadelphia students began in September.

The move comes at a time when the Philadelphia School District has boosted counseling services, especially at the city's large, troubled neighborhood high schools. The district also is requiring all high school freshmen to create "individualized learning plans" in an effort to boost graduation and college-going rates.

Mayor Nutter has made doubling the number of Philadelphians who earn a bachelor's degree a key priority of his administration.