



## Hard Work, High Hopes

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In a Texas border town along a curve of the Rio Grande, everyone takes college classes in high school. Half of the class of 2014 earned an associate degree, a vocational certificate, or a year's worth of college credits, as well as a Hidalgo Early College High School diploma. For Mexican American students in a minimum-wage town, it's better to aim too high than to take the easy path, says Superintendent Ed Blaha.

At a San Jose charter high school, Latino students (and a few blacks, Asians, and whites) struggle to get on the college track and stay there. *Ganas* (Spanish for desire, determination, or—yes—grit) is essential for Downtown College Prep's students.

"Find a way or make one" is the motto of Providence St. Mel, an all-black private school, formerly Catholic, on Chicago's West Side. Every year, all graduates are accepted at four-year colleges and universities, and more than half go to selective "tier 1" colleges.

President Obama wants the U.S. to lead the world in college graduates, but college dreams usually don't come true for the children of poorly educated, low-income parents. Two-thirds of high school graduates enroll in college each fall,<sup>1</sup> yet only 51 percent of low-income (bottom quintile) students go to college, compared to 65 percent of middle-income and 81 percent of upper-income (top quintile) students.

Enrolling is just the first step in a long journey.

Nationwide, only 59 percent of students who enrolled in a four-year school in Fall 2006 had earned a bachelor's degree six years later. Success rates are much lower at open-access and less selective institutions, where low-income students are likely to enroll.<sup>2</sup> Although half of all people from high-income families earn a bachelor's degree by age twenty-five, just one in ten people from low-income families do.<sup>3</sup>

Some blame "undermatching": half of students from lower-income or less educated families go to less selective colleges than they're qualified to attend, studies show.<sup>4</sup> "Nationwide, low-income minority students are disproportionately steered toward colleges not where they're most likely to succeed, but where they're most likely to fail," write Ben Miller and Phuong Ly in the *Washington Monthly*.<sup>5</sup>

Many attend what they call "college dropout factories," such as Chicago State University, where the six-year graduation rate is 13 percent, or Southern University in New Orleans, where the six-year graduation rate is 5 percent. Others choose community colleges and for-profit colleges with low success rates.

Only about one in three top-performing students from low- and moderate-income families attends a college with a six-year graduation rate of at least 70 percent,<sup>6</sup> according to a new coalition led by Bloomberg Philanthropies. The initiative hopes to raise that number by funding counselors to help students apply to selective colleges and maximize their financial aid. "Using video chat, email, telephone and text, they will mimic the support network—composed of guidance counselors, teachers, parents and friends—that more affluent high-

school students take for granted,” writes David Leonhardt in the *New York Times*.<sup>7</sup>

Most disadvantaged students, however, are not high achievers. Low-income students are less likely to take a strong college-prep curriculum, reports ACT, and most leave high school without the skills they need to succeed in college.<sup>8</sup>

ACT has developed readiness benchmarks predicting whether students have a 50 percent chance of earning a B or a 75 percent chance of earning a C in first-year courses such as writing, algebra, social science, or biology. Among 2012 graduates who took the ACT, only 10 percent of those from families with less than \$36,000 in income met readiness benchmarks in all four areas (writing, math, reading, and science), and another 10 percent met benchmarks in three subjects. Forty-six percent of lower-income students met no benchmarks. That means nearly half were not prepared to pass any first-year college course.<sup>9</sup>

In 2014, only 18 percent of black students and 23 percent of Latinos met three or four benchmarks, ACT reported.<sup>10</sup> The achievement gap between wealthy and poor students is widening, according to Sean Reardon, a Stanford education professor.<sup>11</sup> Federal programs to help disadvantaged students prepare for college have shown little success, concludes a Brookings analysis, though there are “hints” that summer programs, mentoring, tutoring, and parent involvement “have sometimes been associated with higher college enrollment.”<sup>12</sup>

Low-income achievers often lose ground in high school, an Education Trust study found. “They enter strong and leave less so,” says Kati Haycock, the group’s president. “Something is going seriously wrong.” Education Trust looks for schools that are “beating the odds” for disadvantaged students. Few are high schools, says Haycock. “We’ve seen how not easy this is.”

It’s not easy, but it’s not impossible either. This chapter will introduce three high schools—a district-run public school, a charter school, and a private school—that work relentlessly to help disadvantaged students get to and through college. It will look at what’s working, what’s still a work in progress, and how policymakers and philanthropists can support and create odds-beating high schools in their communities.

### **Find a Way or Make One**

“It’s easy to get kids into college,” says Paul Adams, founder of Providence St. Mel’s and now its executive chairman. Qualifying them for top schools—not just unselective universities and community colleges—is more difficult.

The greatest challenge, even for the best college-prep high schools, is inculcating the academic and character strengths that will enable low-income, first-generation students to get through college. Strong academic skills are necessary, but students also need to be industrious, resilient, and determined to overcome obstacles and complete a degree.<sup>13</sup>

High schools that make a difference for disadvantaged students share some common approaches.

### I. *They start early*

Hidalgo's "early college for all" program starts in elementary school, where teachers introduce college expectations, and intensifies in middle school, with career planning and preparation for the placement exam that will enable students to start taking college classes in high school. Ninth graders take a University Success course that teaches study skills, note taking, and time management.

Once a high school, Providence St. Mel now starts in prekindergarten, though many students enroll later. Those who start in ninth or tenth grade have to work very hard to catch up academically and to learn the school culture.

"I'm not sure pre-K is early enough," says Adams. "Maybe we need to start before they're born."

Downtown College Prep, where 80 percent of new students are two or more years behind, began as a high school in 2000. The average ninth grader started with fifth- to sixth-grade reading and math skills and the belief that homework was optional. To have any chance at college success, some students were put on "the five-year plan."

Five years ago, DCP opened a middle school in East San Jose. Sixth graders typically start with fourth-grade skills. By ninth grade, the average student is working at or above grade level. That's enabled the East San Jose high school to offer two engineering courses and plan for AP courses in a wide range of subjects.

The flagship high school opened a feeder middle school this year. Jennifer Andaluz, DCP's cofounder and executive director, plans to redesign the high school to serve prepared students. "No more ninth graders who can't read!"

### II. *They create a safe, supportive, "college-going culture" with high expectations—and high tolerance for failure*

Students must believe they can improve if they work hard enough. They must go to college with academic skills and the ability to handle fear, frustration, and failure. No guts, no glory.

DCP's lore includes the story of the boys' basketball team's first season. It should have been a crushing defeat, but the Lobos were uncrushable. The *San Jose Mercury News* ran a front-page story:<sup>14</sup>

Sammy Garcia is one basketball player who can see progress in a 98-10 loss. "What do you mean? This was much better than the first game," he said Thursday. Downtown College Prep High School, where grade-point averages mean more than

scoring percentages, lost its opener the day before, 110-6.

... Jennifer Andaluz, the school's co-founder and executive director, doesn't worry that the routs will harm the psyches of her students.

"These kids have all lost before," she said.

Years later, Mac Dickerson proudly recalls playing in that lopsided game. He played basketball in a summer church league to improve. By senior year, he was captain of the team. "We had some solid wins," he recalls. "We proved we could grow. We could get better."

### III. *They plan*

"Successful schools really work hard on consistency in academic expectations and discipline standards," says Haycock. "Support isn't just offered. They make sure kids get help." Groups of teachers "analyze data to see what's working and what isn't."

Daniel King, who brought early college for all to Hidalgo, doesn't believe in dreams. "Instead of just dreaming and then waking up at age 25 ... there's a difference between a dream and a plan of work."

That echoes PSM's mission statement: "Work, plan, build, and dream—in that order."

### IV. *They use a longer school day and/or summer school to help students catch up and move ahead*

PSM has a long school day, and students with less than a 2.0 grade point average stay even later each day and attend summer school. DCP also has a long day, including a mandatory study period and heavy use of summer school. At Hidalgo High, taking college classes in the summer is cool, says Superintendent Blaha. Students say, "You're not taking college classes? Why not?"

### V. *They reach out to parents and the larger community*

Downtown College Prep, Providence St. Mel, and Hidalgo Early College High are deeply embedded in their communities. DCP and PSM raise millions of dollars for college scholarships and special programs. They also look to local businesses for internships. Hidalgo works closely with University of Texas–PanAmerican, South Texas College, and Texas State Technical College.

DCP offers evening and weekend workshops for parents—in both Spanish and English—to explain college options. That includes how to pay for it without heavy loans.

Going to college is "a rite of passage for whole family," a DCP study concluded. Senior photos aren't of the student alone. Seniors pose with their mothers, fathers, and often grandparents, brothers, and sisters.

Hidalgo schools have little staff turnover. "Principals know the parents"—and sometimes

the grandparents, says Blaha. “There’s a sense of trust.”

VI. *They introduce students to the larger world they hope to enter*

Classes on college campuses, internships at businesses, summer camps, and wilderness adventures can be preparation for going to a college where classmates will be more affluent and a lot whiter than their neighborhood friends.

DCP teaches the school culture to incoming sixth graders in a summer College Corps at nearby Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school that has provided scholarships to DCP graduates. Students sleep in the dorms for a first taste of college life.

SCU also hosts a five-week summer session for DCP’s high school students. The students take college classes in ceramics and writing taught by “real professors,” who are asked to grade them as though they were college students.

PSM donors fund Summer of a Lifetime (SOAL), which gives Chicago kids the kind of enriching experiences their parents couldn’t afford. Sheila Foster, now a teacher at the school, remembers learning archery, horseback riding, canoeing, and kayaking at a Minnesota camp.

Twelfth-grader Jessica Bailey studied theater and classical civilization at Oxford. “My drama teacher was an actor. She called in a dramaturge to work on the script we were doing. We did a workshop at the Globe Theatre.” Jessica made friends from Lebanon, the United Arab Republics, the Philippines, and Cambodia.

Her classmate, Ebonee Offord, went to a summer session at Brown and keeps in touch with one of her professors and a girl from Thailand.

VII. *They’re usually small*

Hidalgo High is small for a comprehensive high school, with 962 students. Downtown College Prep’s high school has 420 students. Providence St. Mel’s high school enrollment is 225 this year.

“It’s possible to get very strong results in a large school, but it’s not clear it can be done if kids are way, way behind,” says Haycock.

Small schools have “the Cheers effect.” They’re places where “everybody knows your name.”

VIII. *They don’t have to be selective*

As a private school, Providence St. Mel can reject students who don’t meet its academic or behavioral standards. Parents who aren’t willing or able to pay tuition—a minimum of \$100 a month for low-income families—will send their children elsewhere.

Downtown College Prep’s model is designed for underachievers.

Hidalgo has a small alternative school, but everyone else in town goes to the same high school. “Low-income strivers are vastly more likely to succeed at a low-poverty or selective exam school,” says Haycock. As an individual, “always go to the highest-quality, most selective place.”

But system-wide, exam schools and high-performing charters “bleed off” the high achievers, she says. The challenge is to create high schools that provide a path to college for all students. “The only way out of poverty for low-income kids is a college education now.”

#### IX. *They align curriculum to college expectations*

In the college-for-all era, many high schools place all or almost all students on what’s supposed to be a college-prep track. If students aren’t prepared to pass a real algebra, biology, or English course, teachers are pressured to pass them along anyhow. Even A and B students may find themselves taking remedial courses in college.

College-prep high schools for disadvantaged students must understand what students need to succeed in college.

Taking college courses in 11th and 12th grade gives Hidalgo students a sense of what they’ll need if they go on to a university or to the community college to learn a trade. University-bound students often take AP courses in addition to dual-enrollment courses.

Providence St. Mel has aligned its curriculum to Illinois and Common Core standards and AP curriculum strands, says DiBella. Teachers engage students in discussion and debate to ensure they understand what they’re learning. Remediation happens after school, not during classes. “We don’t dummy down” the curriculum, says the principal. Forty-five percent of students take AP courses.

Rigor has been a challenge for Downtown College Prep, which was designed for underachievers. “Blended learning”—self-paced programs using adaptive software—has transformed math instruction. “If you walk into a math class, you’ll see every student working at their own level on a Chromebook with the teacher moving to various small groups,” says Andaluz.

In English classes, students used to read six or seven books as a class. Now, the whole class reads two or three books, and each student reads fifteen to twenty books at his or her level. “They’re doing lots more reading and writing,” says Andaluz.

The high school offers AP Spanish and U.S. History classes. Andaluz hopes to expand enrollment to 600 students to support more advanced and AP courses.

### **Early College in the Rio Grande Valley**

Hidalgo, Texas, is one of the poorest and least-educated towns in the state—and in the U.S. Unemployment is high, and wages are low. Proclaimed the “killer bee capital of the world” in 1992—there’s a giant bee statue in front of City Hall—Hidalgo also is the early college capital of the U.S.

Nearly all students at Hidalgo’s only comprehensive high school come from low-income Mexican American families. Half are not fluent in English. Some are the first in their families to attend high school. Many of their parents speak only Spanish.

Yet 83 percent of Hidalgo Early College High School students pass at least one college class. Twenty-two percent complete an associate degree, and 25 percent earn a certificate. Others earn enough credits to get a head start on a vocational certificate or a degree.

“Early college,” also known as “dual enrollment,” is spreading across the country. The idea is not aimed at honors students. Early college is meant to motivate students who aren’t on the college track, raising their aspirations as well as their academic competence.

In 2005, University of Texas–PanAmerican proposed that Hidalgo start an early college program within its high school. The Gates Foundation funded the experiment.

“Why not do it for everyone?” thought Daniel King, who was Hidalgo Independent School District’s superintendent at the time.

It was a crazy idea. The district had raised its graduation rate, but many high school students were working below grade level. However, King believed students needed to make “the connection” between high school, college, and the rest of their lives.

The district aligned classes to prepare students to take college courses in eleventh and twelfth grade, writes Thad Nodine in *Hidalgo Sets Sail*.<sup>15</sup>

“Since 2005, the district’s efforts have transformed its elementary and middle schools as well as its high school. The district has driven college expectations, more rigorous course sequencing and student support systems into all of its schools.”

Middle school students begin preparing to pass the state exam that qualifies them to take college-level courses. “They need tenacity, a commitment to work and study,” says King. “We can impart that.”

Early college changed the culture at Hidalgo High, King says. Taking college classes—sometimes on a community college or university campus, sometimes at the high school—became the cool thing. “Their friends are doing it. They want to do it.”

Ed Blaha, Hidalgo’s current superintendent, was principal of Hidalgo High when the early college program started. It took time to get buy-in from teachers and students, he recalls. “We created freshman and sophomore classes to build students’ confidence.”



Everyone takes a University Success Course that teaches study skills, note taking, and time management. The summer before junior year, all rising juniors took six college credits in speech and computer information systems. “That was an eye opener for the kids,” says Blaha. Professors were told not to water down the courses. Yet “a vast majority” earned the six college credits. “Students said, ‘I can do this.’”

Forty-eight rising seniors took Philosophy at UT-PanAm over the summer. Their classmates were college-age students. “They thought our kids must be little geniuses,” recalls Blaha. Forty-four Hidalgo students passed; forty earned a B or an A.

Career planning starts in sixth grade and “goes a little deeper” in seventh and eighth. “They need exposure to what’s out there,” says Blaha. “There’s a big world beyond the Rio Grande Valley. The opportunities are immense.”

By high school, students have chosen an area of interest, though they may change their minds as they go along.

Hidalgo tries to get students to pass the state’s college readiness exam, which will qualify them for college courses, as soon as possible. However, even those who never pass the exam can take four college courses: speech, computer science, Spanish, and art appreciation.

About 20 percent of students choose a vocational pathway, taking courses at the nearby community or technical college.

When Hidalgo High started, it had grant money to pay university professors to teach at the high school, with a high school teacher serving as an aide, tutor, and study group leader. Teachers learned about college expectations.

Now that the grant has run out, Hidalgo is paying teachers a small bonus to earn a master’s degree in their subject area so they can be hired as adjunct professors. This has made early college—including the extra tutoring required—financially feasible.

The high school’s low pass rate on the state exams turned up in 2007 but remains below the state average. The graduation rate, 98.8 percent, is much higher than the state average.

By eleventh grade, Hidalgo High students score close to the state average in reading, math, and science and slightly above in social studies. However, only 58 percent of district’s 2013 graduates were college ready in all areas: 77 percent in math, 69 percent in reading, and 64 percent in writing, reports the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.<sup>16</sup>

Fifty-four percent of 2013 graduates enrolled in a Texas college or university, with 55 percent at a four-year institution and 45 percent at community college. Those who went out of state aren’t counted, but most stay close to home.

Undocumented students aren't eligible for financial aid, but some manage to go to college anyhow. "You'll find kids who will fight their way to it," says Blaha.

Many Hidalgo parents grew up in Mexico, where mandatory schooling ends at sixth grade. At first, some didn't see what good it would do to earn college credits. But that's changed, says Blaha. Parents' expectations are rising on the border—and across the country.

In a 2009 Pew Hispanic Center survey, 88 percent of Latinos aged sixteen and older agreed that a college degree is necessary to get ahead in life today, compared to 74 percent of the general population.<sup>17</sup>

Latino college enrollment has surged, reports Pew. Sixty-nine percent of Latino high school graduates in 2012 enrolled in college, compared to 67 percent of whites.<sup>18</sup>

However, young Latinos are less likely than their white classmates to enroll in a four-year college, to attend a selective college, to be enrolled in college full time, and to complete a bachelor's degree. Many go to community colleges, take remedial courses, and drop out before earning a credential of any kind.

Raising aspirations isn't enough: students need to be prepared to succeed.

Nationwide, the average early college student graduates from high school with a year of college credit, says Joel Vargas of Jobs for the Future, which coordinates the Early College High School Initiative.

Early college students are more likely to enroll in college, and persistence rates appear to be higher, too. However, the programs are so new that it's hard to track graduation rates.

An AIR study completed in 2014 compared early college students at ten high schools to students who'd applied for early college but lost the lottery. The early college students earned higher English scores and were more likely to earn a high school diploma (86 percent to 81 percent) and enroll immediately in college (81 percent to 72 percent.)<sup>19</sup>

Early college students were just as likely as the control group to go to four-year colleges but were much more likely to enroll in two-year colleges. The impact was stronger for minority students than nonminority students, stronger for lower-income students than higher-income students, and stronger for students with higher achievement in middle school than students with lower achievement in middle school.

Early college students earned higher scores on state exams and had better attendance rates, according to a 2011 SRI study on the Texas High School Project.<sup>20</sup>

"Early College" high school students in North Carolina are more likely to be on track for college than similar students in traditional high schools, according to Julie Edmunds, a University of North Carolina researcher. In some cases, the early college model is closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.<sup>21</sup>

ECHS students have higher attendance and fewer suspensions, reports Edmunds. They report “more positive school experiences than students in the control group, including better relationships, higher expectations, more rigorous and relevant instruction, and more academic and social support.”

In her study, 86 percent of early college students enrolled in college, compared to 65 percent of the control group.

North Carolina has the most early college programs, including some five-year programs designed to include the first two years of college. A federal Investing in Innovation grant to North Carolina New Schools<sup>22</sup> will fund early college high schools in rural areas of the state.

Texas is number two in early college programs and is expanding its programs rapidly.

Denver wants to offer early college for all, reports Vargas. Brownsville, Texas, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, also are looking at the Hidalgo model.

### **Downtown College Prep: To and Through**

Berenice Cervantes’s parents—Dad has a third-grade education, Mom made it to fifth grade—left their small town in Mexico when their daughter was a baby. The town had an elementary school but no middle school or high school. They wanted better opportunities for their kids.

They picked crops in California’s Central Valley, and then they found work in San Jose, California. Her father was a driver, her mother a janitor.

“I saw their sacrifice, how hard they worked,” recalls Cervantes. “I had to excel to pay them back. My grades were my paychecks to them.”

A Mount Holyoke graduate, Cervantes is college access and success coordinator for Summer Search, a nonprofit that provides mentoring, summer enrichment experiences, and counseling to disadvantaged students from tenth grade through college.

McKinley “Mac” Dickerson spent several years in a homeless shelter when he was in elementary school. In middle school, his emotional issues led to a special-education diagnosis.

As an agent and trainer for Transamerica, Dickerson helps families plan their finances, including how to save money for college. He earned an economics degree from University of California at Santa Cruz. His goal is to be “DCP’s first millionaire alumni,” he says.

Both are 2005 graduates of Downtown College Prep, a scrappy charter school in San Jose.

San Jose’s first charter school opened its doors—the doors of an old church and a former

YWCA blocks apart—in 2000. Two young teachers, Greg Lippman and Jennifer Andaluz, targeted underachievers from Mexican immigrant families, kids who were “failing but not in jail,” as Lippman put it. With a longer school day and a relentless focus on college prep, they believed their charter could put C, D, and F students on the college track.

In the early years, 85 percent of its students were Latino and nearly all were from low-income and working-class families. Some came with special-ed labels: learning disabled, developmentally delayed, emotionally and behaviorally disordered. Others weren’t fluent in English.

Psychologist Carol Dweck hadn’t yet popularized the importance of the “growth mindset,” the belief that hard work will lead to success. KIPP hadn’t yet concluded that disadvantaged students need “grit” to make it through college.

DCP was all about grit, known as *ganas*, before it was fashionable. “We’re not good now but we can get better” was the unofficial motto, as I wrote in my book *Our School*, about DCP’s early years.<sup>23</sup>

“At DCP, low achievers aren’t told they’re doing well; they’re told they can do better, if they work hard. The school doesn’t boost self-esteem with empty praise. Instead Lippman and his teachers encourage what’s known as ‘efficacious thinking,’ the belief that what a person does has an effect. If you study, you’ll do better on the test than if you goof off. Work hard in school, and you can get to college. You have control over your future. So, stop making excuses and start getting your act together.”

At one assembly, teachers acted out the fable of the tortoise and the hare. A math teacher bragged about how he didn’t need to work, while the Mexican American “college readiness” teacher kept on going and won the race.

Lippman and Andaluz had overestimated their students’ skills, they realized. “They can’t read,” Andaluz said. They’d overestimated the power of a college-going culture. Students quickly adopted the goal of going to college. It took much longer to learn the work habits of serious students and even longer to develop the reading, writing, and math skills.

As principal, Lippman was quick to say, “I made a mistake. We need to do this differently.” The founders realized some students needed English as a second language courses or remedial math (“math reasoning”) or remedial English (“verbal reasoning”) in addition to Algebra I and English I. DCP struggled—and it got better.

These days, with two middle schools and a second high school, 90 percent of DCP students come from low-income families; 96 percent are Latino. Forty-one percent of parents did not complete high school. Many of the immigrant parents didn’t start high school. Only 4 percent of parents and 13 percent of older siblings have a college degree. Of the school’s enrollees, 80 percent are below grade level by at least two years in English and/or math.

In San Jose’s Mexican immigrant neighborhoods, DCP has made college going the “new

normal,” said Andaluz at the 2014 graduation, which also celebrated the tenth anniversary of the first commencement.

The difference between people who “reach their full potential” and those who don’t is “how they deal with adversity,” said the keynote speaker, Salman Khan, creator of Khan Academy. Brain scans show that “the time when the brain grows is when you get questions wrong, when you fail at something but you power through it and keep on going.”

It was a very DCP message.

Honesty remains the policy, says Edgar Chavez, who monitors college readiness as college success director. It’s OK to make mistakes, as long as you learn from them.

“Who you are isn’t who you’re going to be,” adds Prisilla Lerza, who works with donors, alumni, and parents as community engagement director.

Even if graduates need remedial coursework in college, they’re “emotionally ready” for the challenges, says Andaluz. “We work to build their self-efficacy,” the belief that they are capable of achieving their goals if they work hard enough. Graduates “are ready to fail, to take risks and to persist in college,” she says.

Some students take double math and double English in ninth grade. If they fall behind, they go to summer school to stay on track.

The attrition rate—once very high—has come down dramatically in recent years thanks to self-paced learning and a new discipline policy.

To be eligible for a University of California or California State University school, students must pass the A-G college-prep sequence with C’s or better. Ninety-one percent succeed. The median grade-point average is a 3.07, but the median ACT is only 17.

Of the school’s graduates, 95 percent enroll in college: 18 percent start at the University of California, and 35 percent start at a California State University campus. In all, 84 percent are accepted at four-year schools.<sup>24</sup> By comparison, 53 percent of California’s high school graduates—34 percent of California Latinos—enroll in college. Statewide, 15 percent of Latino high school graduates enroll at a four-year school.

About 20 percent of DCP students are undocumented, which means they’re not eligible for state or federal student aid. Most start at community colleges, which cost very little. DCP raises scholarship funds to help them transfer to a university after two years.

The school also works with nonprofits to help students set up college savings accounts. For every dollar the student puts in, the nonprofit will provide \$2 from the federal government. Undocumented students are eligible. That’s helped DCP students avoid or minimize college loans, says Lerza, who used to be the financial aid counselor.

“To and through” is DCP’s motto. Counselors don’t just help seniors apply to college and figure out how to pay for it. Using social media, Skype, and email, they work with graduates to help them cope with academic, personal, and financial problems in college and out.

Graduates can use the Alumni Success Center at the downtown high school campus to study or apply for jobs. Dropouts come by for advice on making a new college plan.

“We say we’re not grade 6 to 12, we’re grade 6 to 16,” says Lerza. “Really we’re grade 6 to age 30.”

DCP’s graduates—often the children of gardeners, janitors, and construction workers – don’t have connections in the professional world. DCP counselors and alumni “serve as a career network for our students,” she says.

In addition, the school has partnered with Beyond 12, a nonprofit that monitors students’ college progress and provides online coaching, quizzes, and other tools to keep students on track to a degree.<sup>25</sup>

Counselors encourage students to choose the most selective “right-fit” college, says Andaluz. The two-year college retention rate is 90 percent. The class of 2012 had a 98 percent retention rate, double the state average for all college students. Graduates who start at community college are transferring to state universities after two years, often with help from the Puente Project, which provides academic and personal counseling.

However, the path to college graduation “is not a linear journey,” states *I Am the First*, a study of DCP’s impact.<sup>26</sup> There are many stumbles and side trips for first-generation students. By 2012, only 49 percent of the class of 2004 had earned a degree. Another 18 percent were enrolled in a college or alternative program. Of the class of 2005, 30 percent had completed college and 27 percent were enrolled. Six years later, 21 percent of the class of 2006 were college graduates and 58 percent were enrolled.

Overall, 58 percent of DCP graduates have earned a degree or are working toward one, says Chavez. His job is to improve those numbers.

Luis Falcon started in DCP’s first class but had to repeat eleventh grade to raise his grades. He earned his diploma in 2005 and got into a California State University. But his plans were derailed when he was stabbed—and nearly killed—by gang members. He spent a week in a coma and nine months in rehab. (As a victim of a violent crime, he qualified for a green card.) He tried community college before dropping out and taking a factory job. He tightened screws for three years.

Finally, he reenrolled in community college. He volunteered as a tutor at DCP. He transferred to University of California at Santa Cruz.

Nine years after he finished high school, Falcon earned a history degree. A Teach for America corps member, he’s now a social studies teacher at a DCP middle school.

Dickerson, Falcon's classmate in the class of 2005, also took nine years to complete a UC–Santa Cruz degree. “I did the ugliest amount of growth in college,” he says. “I needed to do it, but it wasn't pretty growth.”

In 2010, one course short of graduation, he ran out of money. He made up in the missing credit in 2014.

Berenice Cervantes was an “academic star” at DCP. She'd always wanted to go to college but “didn't know how to go about it.”

“If I hadn't gone to DCP, I probably would have stayed local,” says Cervantes. “I might have gone to community college and tried to transfer.”

Instead, DCP's college counselor pushed her to apply to Mount Holyoke, which gave her a full scholarship. She almost turned it down. The college counselor set up a trip to western Massachusetts for Cervantes and her mother. “I needed my mother to see it and say OK.”

The first year, Cervantes struggled with writing. She learned to ask for help. She used office hours to talk to her professors; she used the tutoring center. “I knew I had to earn my spot there.” She improved.

Cervantes earned a degree in international relations. After two years as DCP's college counselor, she moved on to Summer Search. As college access and success coordinator, she passes on the skills she learned at Mount Holyoke: how to find help and build a “team” of supporters.

“It's so key to know they belong on campus,” says Cervantes.

She works with students from seventeen Silicon Valley high schools. All do a wilderness trip that puts them in a different environment, a chance to “connect with others who don't look like them.” The second trip takes them abroad for academics or community service. The third is a college trip.

### **Providence St. Mel: The hard work school**

Boys in sagging pants step off the Chicago Transit bus. As they approach a large, brick building, they pull up their khaki pants and tuck in their shirts. Providence St. Mel doesn't allow street fashions or street values.

“You can recognize a Providence St. Mel student,” says senior Greg Magee. “There's a certain esteem. We're proud of what we have going on here.”

Founded by the merger of two Catholic schools, Providence St. Mel nearly closed in 1978. The Archdiocese didn't want to cover the budget deficit or repair the 1929-era building. Paul J. Adams III, the principal, raised money to turn PSM into an independent school dedicated to preparing African American students for college success. PSM's supporters

now include some of the largest foundations and corporations in Chicago.

Ninety-nine percent of students are black and 80 percent come from families that qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch.

All PSM students are accepted at four-year colleges and universities. Most go to selective universities. Seventy-three percent earn a bachelor's degree, according to a 2004 study. Principal Jeanette DiBella thinks it's even higher now. She's trying to persuade a university to update the study.

The average family pays \$300 a month in tuition for the ten-month school year, but some pay as little as \$100 a month, a small fraction of the \$14,200 annual cost per student. Everyone pays something.

It's increasingly difficult to persuade parents to pay tuition when charters are free, says Adams, who's now the executive chairman. PSM's median ACT score is 24, compared to 14 to 16 for nearby high schools and 17.6 for Chicago Public Schools. But many parents don't realize how important that is, he says. "It's a miracle we get some of our kids," he says. "After four generations of miseducation."

The school starts with pre-K, but most ninth graders are new to PSM. Among top students, "we get what's left" after the selective-enrollment high schools take their picks and high-quality charters run their lotteries, says DiBella.

At the secondary level, applicants who are two years or more below grade level must attend summer school to show they can "follow our behavioral expectations and make it academically," says DiBella. A few are rejected every year.

Low-performing students get lots of extra help to catch up. Teachers monitor their progress closely. All students with less than a 2.0 grade point average must stay after school for an extra study period and attend summer school.

By the end of junior year, all students need at least a 2.0 grade point average to meet their "junior contract." A few fall short and transfer out.

As a teacher of emotionally and behaviorally disordered students in her Chicago Public Schools career, "I'm good at reshaping behavior," says DiBella. She expels 1 to 2 percent of students.

But there are rules. If students become pregnant—or get a girl pregnant—they "lose the privilege of being in our school," says DiBella. Students understand the consequences, she says. "We're very strict on discipline, very structured."

Students aren't suspended: they're assigned to clean the nearly hundred-year-old building, assisting "our somewhat grumpy maintenance staff."



Consistency is key, she says. Grades, homework policy, discipline—everything must be consistent. Students need to know what to expect.

DiBella came to PSM nineteen years ago. The average teacher has been there for twelve years. That stability is an asset, says the principal. “We recruit and retain teachers who will stick. They have to be content specialists who are very smart and passionate about their subject.”

Teachers need to empathize with students but not pity them, says DiBella. She won’t hire “missionaries.”

“I’m not into feeling sorry for poor students on the West Side,” she says. It’s not “you poor pitiful child, your mother’s in jail, your grandmother’s sick.” Her message is, “You can do it. We have a ticket to get out of poverty.”

Some parents complain that their children have to stay too late and work too hard, says Adams. “We have a formula that works. I’m not going to change it.”

“We teach our students to value education more than the streets,” says DiBella. That requires a “warm and supportive atmosphere that makes students feel valued in class and believe in themselves,” she says. “I believe in you. You can and will succeed.”

PSM teaches discipline, says Owens Shelby, class of 2000, an assistant state’s attorney in Cook County. “You have to be organized. You have to be prepared for class. If you don’t complete a homework assignment, you stay after class to finish it and still get half off.”

PSM is stricter than public schools, as Tim Ervin discovered when he started in ninth grade. The academic standards are higher and there is much more homework. “I bought in right away. If I knew what the rules were, I followed them.” PSM made him “dream bigger,” says Ervin, who was the valedictorian in 1991. He graduated from Purdue and worked in business for seventeen years. He volunteered as a basketball coach and was ordained as a minister. After a corporate layoff, he returned to PSM to coach basketball and teach Christian morality. Both subjects focus on developing character, says Ervin. Tough love works, he says. “We work you because we love you. If kids feel you care, they’ll do whatever you want.”

PSM was a lot harder than her neighborhood public school, says Sheila Foster, who transferred in third grade. She’d been a shy student, an average achiever. Her PSM teachers wouldn’t “let me fade into the background.”

“The expectations are through the roof—but not unattainable,” says Foster. “They help you develop a work ethic.” When she made the quarterly honor roll, she was awarded a share of stock in McDonald’s. “Nobody in my neighborhood owned stock. I was a third grader and an owner of stock. Nobody my age had heard of the stock market.”

She kept making the honor roll and saw her stock accumulate. Students can sell their

shares when they graduate and go to college or continue to build their portfolio. “I learned early on that hard work will pay off,” says Foster. A University of Illinois graduate, she went on to earn a master’s degree and now teaches PSM’s kindergarten class.

PSM is “an island that excludes gangs, substance abuse and other criminal behaviors,” concluded a 2004 Michigan State study.<sup>27</sup> “This is a place where students can work and learn without having to be concerned about their safety.”

Violence has worsened in Chicago in the last ten years, but PSM has a large security guard and a metal detector at the door to keep the chaos out. That’s important to parents, who choose the school for safety as well as academics.

“Some boys change out of their uniforms when they leave,” says DiBella. “They need to blend in” as they travel back to their homes. When a student was badly beaten by someone trying to steal his sneakers, PSM started requiring students to wear black shoes. Nobody wants to steal “church shoes.”

Inside, the school is orderly and purposeful. Visit any classroom, starting in prekindergarten, and a student will shake hands, introduce him or herself, and explain what the class is studying at the moment.

Outside, neighborhood teens “expect us to be condescending and patronizing,” says Greg Magee. “Of course, I’m humble and down to earth,” he adds, to the laughter of his classmates.

“My friends don’t understand why I’m so serious about school,” says Ebonee Offord, also a twelfth grader. “Everything we do is about getting ready to go to the next level.”

Senior Mbahgwie Mudoh’s parents came from Cameroon to attend college in the U.S. “With my family, coming to America from Africa, education, education, education . . . it’s very important to them,” he says.

Students use the word “love” to describe science, writing, history, theater, and an internship at a consulting firm.

Jessica Bailey’s mother told her, “You’re too smart for public school.” In PSM’s elementary school, she planned to be a biologist. Then “I fell in love with theater,” inspired by the school musical. A twelfth grader, she hopes to major in theater at Northwestern, but she also loves history.

Jessica is wearing a black polo shirt advertising a past school musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. An all-black high school did *Fiddler*? “We thought it was a little odd at first, but it came out great!” says Jessica. “I was Fruma!”

Her friend Ebonee was “determined to be neurologist” in first grade. “I was seven and I was planning to go to Stanford.” Now she wants to be a novelist or actress. She’s aiming at

Columbia, Brown, and University of Michigan.

Mbahgwie hopes to major in business at DePaul and then work at Deloitte, an accounting firm where he was an intern. “I fell in love with what they do,” he says.

Greg is eyeing the University of Iowa’s writing program. He hopes to write for television.

In PSM classes, teachers “expect us to talk, not just regurgitate information,” says Jessica. “Greg is notorious for never agreeing with the teacher. But you have to come up with evidence to support your argument.”

In AP classes, starting in eleventh grade, teachers “treated us like college students,” says Ebonee. “They say, ‘It’s your responsibility to do the work.’”

Seniors take a class that gives them time to explore college options, write essays, and apply for the financial aid that will make college possible. Everyone takes the ACT at least three times. It’s not enough to get in. They need scores high enough to qualify for scholarships.

Figuring out how to pay for college is the most stressful part, says Jessica. But it’s all stressful. “You’re standing on the edge of a cliff and you’re about to jump!”

There are other college-prep models for disadvantaged students. Brooklyn’s P-TECH, designed with help from IBM, takes students through high school and the first two years of community college. Students can earn an associate degree and a job offer from IBM. It’s expected some will go on to earn a bachelor’s degree, but that’s not their only path to the middle class. President Obama praised the school in his 2013 State of the Union speech and visited later that year.

There are many high-performing, “no excuses” charter schools that specialize in educating lower-income black and Latino students. In Boston, the MATCH charter, which provides intensive tutoring, gets very strong academic results.

Cristo Rey, a network of Catholic schools, has a longer school day four days a week. On the fifth day, students work in a professional workplace, learning job skills, building a network, and contributing their pay to the school to defray the costs of their education. A new Cristo Rey school in San Jose is piloting self-paced, personalized, “blended” learning. In an intensive summer math program, students gained 1.5 to 2 years of proficiency in a few months.<sup>28</sup>

St. Benedict’s Prep in Newark, an all-boys Catholic school run by Benedictine monks, used to educate the children of working-class Irish and German immigrants. Now it prepares young black males to be mature, responsible, educated adults.<sup>29</sup>

To make upward mobility a reality, college must be more than a dream for low-income students. It needs to be, as Daniel King puts it, “a plan of work.”

College and career counseling is especially critical for students whose parents aren't college educated. Counseling needs to start in middle school, at the latest, and continue—in some form—through college.

Students need to be introduced to potential careers and told what they need to be doing in school to reach their goals. Is a C average good enough to make it at a university? No. Will it prepare the student to train for a skilled job at a community college? Probably not. Are there high-paying jobs for people who “just can't do math?” Not really.

Once students are thinking about their goals, they need a choice of schools that will help them get there. Urban Catholic and other private schools can be very effective—if donors keep them alive. Charter caps or a lack of facility funding may limit the number of “no excuses” charter options. High-quality magnet schools can't take everyone who applies. And comprehensive high schools may not offer challenging courses. (Letting unprepared students take AP-in-name-only courses, with no hope of passing the exam, doesn't really help.)

Students who choose a career pathway need rigorous courses, too—but not necessarily the same ones required for a bachelor's degree. As Hidalgo illustrates, career-minded students can use dual enrollment to earn vocational certificates.

Some states pay tuition and book costs for “early college” students, making it possible for low-income students to participate. Many are aligning community college and state university courses so students can transfer credits easily.

Philanthropists can fund summer and after-school enrichment and job programs to motivate disadvantaged students and expand their horizons.

It's especially important to make it possible for beating-the-odds schools to track their graduates, understand their struggles, and help them overcome personal and academic challenges.

There's a lot to learn.

*SIDEBAR: Providence St. Mel mission statement*

*We believe in the creation of inspired lives produced by the miracle of hard work. We are not frightened by the challenges of reality, but believe that we can change our conception of this world and our place within it. So we work, plan, build and dream—in that order. We believe that one must earn the right to dream. Our talent, discipline and integrity will be our contribution to a new world. Because we believe that we can take this place, this time and this people and make a better place, a better time and a better people. With God's help, we will either find a way or make one!*

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- <sup>3</sup> *Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students: Promising Models and a Call to Action* (Washington, D.C.: The Executive Office of the President, 2014), [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white\\_house\\_report\\_on\\_increasing\\_college\\_opportunity\\_for\\_low-income\\_students\\_1-16-2014\\_final.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white_house_report_on_increasing_college_opportunity_for_low-income_students_1-16-2014_final.pdf).
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- <sup>9</sup> *The Condition of College & Career Readiness: Low-Income Students 2012* (Iowa City, IA: 2012), <http://www.act.org/newsroom/data/2012/states/pdf/LowIncomeStudents.pdf>.
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