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Valley View Elementary students beat the odds

Article by: KIM MCGUIRE, Star Tribune Updated: September 20, 2014 - 10:11 PM

Though the Columbia Heights school has high levels of poverty, its MCA scores are consistently among the highest in the state.



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Emily Letourneau's fifth-grade students are learning about erosion, specifically how the Grand Canyon was formed. And while Letourneau assists her students in conducting a science experiment replicating that process, she's not teaching the lesson. That would be Shauna Richardson, a science teacher at Valley View Elementary.

"It really helps our students having both teachers in the classroom," Letourneau said. "They truly understand that science is a core subject. They see that here in the lab and in my classroom."

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Walk into the Columbia Heights elementary school almost any day, and parents are likely to see multiple teachers in the classroom. It is not unusual to see a special education teacher leading a lesson, while the homeroom teacher works with a student who needs extra help.

Valley View has invested in co-teaching in a big way and it is one of several strategies that is paying academic dividends for the school. Valley View consistently ranks among the top schools in the state that have the highest levels of student poverty and the best scores on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments.

This year, Valley View was the only school that isn't a charter school to make the Star Tribune's annual "Beating the Odds" list, which ranks schools based on poverty and MCA scores in reading and math. Among those schools, it had the second highest score in math and the fourth highest score in reading.

But where Valley View really stands out is how its students of color compare with their peers in other Minnesota schools.

The school's Hispanic, Black and Asian students topped the statewide average of their peers in both reading and math on this year's MCAs. Valley View's Hispanic students — who make up about one-third of the student body — were 74 percent proficient in math. That's more than twice the statewide average.

"They really pay attention to the details at Valley View," Superintendent Kathy Kelly said. "They are very attuned to each individual child and what they need to achieve."

No excuses

Hanging outside every Valley View teacher's door is their college emblem. There are lots of Golden Gophers, Mavericks and St. Olaf Lions.

It is a constant reminder that Valley View staff have high expectations for students, even when the odds might be stacked against them.

About 86 percent of Valley View's students are so poor they qualify for a free or reduced price lunch. About 40 percent are just learning to speak English, a reflection of the school's significant Hispanic and East African population.

"There are no excuses here," said Tara Thukral, the district's curriculum coordinator and a former Valley View teacher and administrator. "We don't say, 'Well at home they're doing this.' No, we look at what we can do here."

Valley View students perform exceptionally in math. About 71 percent of Valley View students are proficient in that subject compared with the statewide average of 61 percent.

Teachers use frequent quizzes to gauge how well students are grasping the content. Many classes use clickers, electronic devices that quickly relay students' answers to a teacher who can then adjust the lesson plan on the spot if needed.

Like the Columbia Heights school district, Valley View has also invested extra effort into helping its students who come from immigrant families and are learning to speak English. Each grade has a teacher assigned to work with those students.

Valley View staff, however, make sure those students are never isolated in the classroom. The same applies for special education students.

"The most important thing that's happening across the school is we see each kid as our own," said teacher Teresa Fenske. "So as a fourth-grade teacher, yes, I'm responsible for the fourth-graders in my class but I feel equally as responsible for the kindergartners, and the fifth-graders."

Principal won't give up

Last September, Valley View Principal Willie Fort was involved in a serious bicycle accident that left him unable to work for about six weeks. His first memory after the crash is of an emergency room sewing up his lip. He also had a concussion and torn rotator cuff.

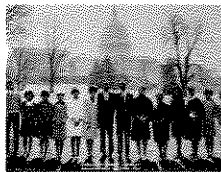
"The last thing I could ever do is give it [cycling] up," Fort said. "The doctor asked me a couple of times if I would and I said, 'No, I gotta do it. It's all I have left. I can't run.'"

Valley View Principal Willie Fort had lunch with fifth-grader Kendrick Dowdell. The two meet often, as Fort has been mentoring Dowdell for three years.

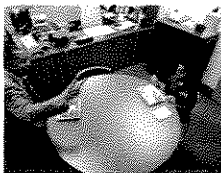


Co-kindergarten teacher Stephanie Kilpatrick aloud to the kids at Valley View. The school has crushing levels of poverty, but maintains outstanding MCA test scores.

Jerry Holt •
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Willie Fort, principal at Valley View pointed at a picture of himself taken in 1966 in Washington D.C. Fort showed the photo to fifth grader Kendrick Dowdell a student has been mentoring for 3 years September 10, 2014 in Columbia Heights, MN. Valley View Elementary stands out each year on the Star Tribune's Beating the Odds list - it is often the only non-charter school to make the list of schools that do very well on the MCA's despite crushing levels of poverty. | Jerry Holt
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Willie Fort, principal at Valley View left had lunch with fifth grader Kendrick Dowdell September 10, 2014 in Columbia Heights, MN. Fort has been mentoring Kendrick for 3 years. Valley View Elementary stands out each year on the Star Tribune's Beating the Odds list - it is often the only non-charter school to make the list of schools that do very well on the MCA's despite crushing levels of poverty. | Jerry Holt
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Fort's refusal to give up cycling is a metaphor for the last chapter of his 32-year career in education.

In 2010, he was an associate superintendent in [Minneapolis](#) when he was reassigned after Superintendent [Bernadeja Johnson](#) was hired. He was then picked up by Columbia Heights, which has about one-tenth as many students as Minneapolis.

"I feel like he was a gift," Kelly said. "We're a small district so every leader counts. When he became available, I jumped at the chance to hire him."

While Fort's been in charge, the school has adopted a number of new initiatives: a policy requiring uniforms; AVID, a college prep program; a new literacy model that emphasizes advanced texts, and the expansion of co-teaching in science classes.

He is currently pulling double duty, also serving as the interim principal at the middle school next door.

"I don't think I've been to any school function where he's not," said Tammy Rogne who has sons at both schools. "He's everywhere."

Fort is modest when it comes to Valley View's success. He says he inherited a strong group of teachers, and he was very comfortable letting them take charge.

"My particular style is that of collaboration," he said. "I don't mind delegating and people know that. I've got competent people here who can get the job done. And that's what they're doing."

Teachers leading the way

Stephanie Kilpatrick reads a book about buses to kindergartners, while Rochelle Look periodically pops in to ask questions. Later, the two lead a rousing rendition of "The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round."

Look is a kindergarten teacher. Kilpatrick works with students who are learning English. Often, it is difficult to distinguish the teachers' assignment based on the ease of their interactions.

The school embraced co-teaching almost a decade ago, first with teachers who work are learning to speak English. Until then, those students were pulled out of class for instruction.

Stephanie Anderson, a teacher who works with bilingual students, said co-teaching has made her better.

"Because when you're teaching with someone else, you're constantly improving," she said. "Ideas are going back and forth, you're questioning things, you're reflecting on your lesson afterward."

Administrators are hopeful that implementing co-teaching in some science classes will help students. Currently, only about 40 percent of the students are proficient in science, according to the latest MCA scores.

Thukral said she expects Valley View students to continue to improve.

"Everybody here does their part," she said. "The students do their part, the teachers, the staff, district — we all do our part."

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