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Every Urban Prep senior is college-bound

100 percent of first senior class at all male, all African-American Englewood academy is accepted to universities

Duaa Eldeib, Tribune reporter



Urban Prep Academy senior Keith Greer, along with his classmates, celebrates the news that 100 percent of the graduating class was accepted into 4-year colleges or universities. (Tribune photo by Heather Charles / March 5, 2010)

Four years ago, Bryant Alexander watched his mother weep.

She stared down at a muddle of D's and F's on his eighth-grade report card and threatened to kick him out. He had barely passed elementary school, and high school wasn't even on his radar.

"Something just clicked," Alexander, now 18, said. "I knew I had to do something."

On Friday, Alexander proudly swapped his high school's red uniform tie for a striped red and gold

one — the ritual at Englewood's Urban Prep Academy for Young Men that signifies a student has been accepted into college.

As the Roseland resident and 12 others tied their knots, Chicago's only public all-male, all-African-American high school fulfilled its mission: 100 percent of its first senior class had been accepted to four-year colleges.

Mayor Richard Daley and city schools chief Ron Huberman surprised students at the all-school

assembly Friday morning with congratulations.

The achievement might not merit a visit from top brass if it happened at one of the city's elite, selective enrollment high schools. But Urban Prep, a charter school that enrolls all comers in one of Chicago's most beleaguered neighborhoods, faced much more difficult odds.

Only 4 percent of this year's senior class read at grade level as freshmen, said Tim King, the school's founder and CEO.

"There were those who told me that you can't defy the data," King said. "Black boys are killed. Black boys drop out of high school. Black boys go to jail. Black boys don't go to college. Black boys don't graduate from college.

"They were wrong," he said.

Every day, before attending advanced placement biology classes and lectures on changing the world, students must first pass through the neighborhood, then metal detectors.

"Poverty, gangs, drugs, crime, low graduation rates, teen pregnancy — you name it, Englewood has it," said Kenneth Hutchinson, the school's director of college counseling, who was born and raised in Englewood.

He met the students the summer before they began their freshman year during a field trip to Northwestern University, the first time many of them had ever stepped foot on a college campus. At the time, Hutchinson was Northwestern's assistant director of undergraduate admissions. Inspired by what he'd seen, he started working for Urban Prep two months later.

"I'm them," he said Friday as he fought back tears. "Being accepted to college is the first step to changing their lives and their communities."

Hutchinson plays a major

role in the school, where college is omnipresent. Students are assigned college counselors from day one. To prepare students for the next level, the school offers a longer than typical day – about 70,000 minutes longer, over four years, than other city schools – and more than double the usual number of English credits, King said.

Even the Urban Prep's voice-mail system has a student declaring "I am college-bound" before asking callers to dial an extension.

The rigorous academic environment and strict uniform policy of black blazers, red ties and khakis isn't for everyone. The first senior class began with 150 students. Of those who left, many moved out of the area and some moved into neighborhoods that were too dangerous to cross to get to the school, King said. Fewer than 10 were expelled or dropped out, he said.

At last count, the 107 seniors gained acceptance to a total of 72 different colleges, including Northwestern University, Morehouse College, Howard University, Rutgers University and University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Alexander was accepted to DePaul University.

While college acceptance is an enormous hurdle to jump, school leaders said they know their job isn't done; they want to make sure the students actually attend.

To that aim, King said, staff made sure that every student has completed the dreaded Free Application for Federal Student Aid, lest the red tape deter them.

Later in the year, the school plans to hold a college signing day where every student is to sign a promise to go to college, he said. Staff will stay in touch through the summer and hopefully in the first years of school.

"We don't want to send them off and say, 'Call us when you're ready to make a donation to your alma mater,'" King said. "If we fulfill our mission, that means they not only are accepted to college, but graduate from it."



Mayor Richard Daley, CPS CEO Ron Huberman, Urban Prep Founder & CEO Tim King stand with members of the Class of 2010.

For now, students are enjoying the glow of reaching their immediate goal.

Normally, it takes 18-year-old Jerry Hinds two buses and 45 minutes to get home from school. On the day the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana was to post his admission decision online at 5 p.m., he asked a friend to drive him to his home in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood.

He went into his bedroom, told his well-wishing mother this was something he had to do alone, closed the door and logged in.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" he remembers screaming. His mother burst in and began crying.

That night he made more than 30 phone calls, at times shouting "I got in" on his cell phone and home phone at the same time.

"We're breaking barriers," he said. "And that feels great."

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For more information on Urban Prep, contact:

Urban Prep Academies
420 N. Wabash • Suite 300
Chicago, IL 60611

312.276.0259

www.urbanprep.org

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