

Are poor, minority kids unqualified for academic success?

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DALLAS (NNPA) - According to statewide 2008 standardized test results, minority students in Texas rank dead last in vital education subjects like math, science, reading and writing. Add to that the devastating effects of poverty, and the statistics paint a not-so-pretty picture of the state of many inner-city youth.

Take Frazier Elementary School in South Dallas, for instance. Located adjacent to the city's worst housing projects, the student body is 98 percent poor and 100 percent minority. With a median annual household income of \$15,000 and 80 percent of the children residing in single-parent households, some assume the area's educational outlook would be bleak.

Not so. The test scores of Frazier students are in the highest percentile in the entire state of Texas, according to the Dallas Morning News. The school has achieved an "exemplary" rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the past eight years. Just one mile away, Daniel "Chappie" James Learning Center was ranked North Texas' No. 1 school in 2005 by D Magazine. The same year, 12 other low-income schools in South Dallas were top-rated.

Fast-forward to 2009 and all of the schools that comprise the heart of South Dallas' District 9 are rated "exemplary," "recognized" or "academically acceptable." All are also comprised of "disadvantaged" youth-the TEA code for low-income students. Two miles from Frazier and "Chappie," Lincoln High School boasts a graduation rate of 84 percent, 15 percentage points higher than the overall city. These schools continue to outperform wealthier suburban schools with no students below the poverty level.

"Poor kids can achieve. They've been doing it for years in South Dallas and it's time we shine a spotlight on what's working," said Ron Price, School Board Trustee for District 9.

Price and his colleagues assert that children's social behavior significantly impacts their education and reform begins in two areas: first behavior modification and then academic accountability.

This came to life in several core initiatives:

- Arbitration of gang truce and pledge of safety
- The signing of a "Contract for Educational Excellence" by all 33 principals in District 9
- Civic and corporate support of employment programs
- Creation of strict codes of conduct, dress and alcohol-free school zones
- Increasing the presence of male teachers/mentors
- Developing peer groups of student leaders
- Rewarding teachers for classroom achievement

"Schools like this are the rule, not the exception," said Price. "Every child counts. You shouldn't have to be middle- or high-income to succeed."

Price is bringing this social and academic blueprint to other districts as a curriculum that can be implemented anywhere and everywhere. Visit www.youtube.com/everychildcounts2009 for all news reports.