

James Barnett leads Minneapolis College Prep

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Thursday, 26 June 2014 15:23



At just 28 years of age and not too far removed from college himself, James Barnett is charged with making sure that students at Minneapolis College Preparatory School attend and graduate college themselves.

Barnett took over the two-year-old charter high school located on the first two floors at 2131 12th Ave. N. in May of last year and already in one year, student test scores are up a few points. Barnett said student success is measured on how well students do on pre ACT and SAT tests. The ACT and SAT tests are the two major tests used – along with grade point averages – to determine college admissions. But for Barnett, he said his greatest success at Minneapolis College Prep (www.minneapoliscollegeprep.org) is not measured in test scores, it is measured in lives transformed.

"What we care about is the students growing and gaining knowledge on a daily basis," said Barnett. "We're doing this with any kid that walks through the door. We're a school where our kids wear uniforms and their sole focus is on going to college. There aren't the social pressures here that are at other schools. At Minneapolis College Prep all the social pressure is being geared towards academic success."

In a relatively short career as an educator Barnett has worked wonders in helping students achieve academic success. Following his graduation from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., Barnett joined Teach For America, a national organization that recruits teachers to work a minimum of two years in lower economic, under-performing schools. During his time at Teach For America Barnett was nominated for the 2010 Sue Lehmann Excellence in Teaching Award and as a first year 8th grade science teacher at KIPP Academy Charlotte (North Carolina), Barnett led 93 percent of his students to pass the state's standardized test for science. This was impressive considering science was not in Barnett's formal background.

"I uncovered a great injustice by how little kids knew about science, so in my third year with Teach For America I decided I to teach science," said Barnett. "If you think about growth and advancement we have to expose our kids to science – expose them to genuine creation where they see their futures form out of those experiences."

James Barnett leads Minneapolis College Prep

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Thursday, 26 June 2014 15:23

The second year principal said he is working to expose the students at Minneapolis College Prep to as many careers and disciplines as possible.

"You don't know what you want to be until you see it, so the goal of the school is to expose our students to a bit of everything in terms of opportunities," said Barnett, who said students are regularly visited by area professionals to discuss careers. "We expose them to everything from arts and music to careers in science."

Of course, Barnett is facing some unique challenges at Minneapolis College Prep – challenges he said he's overcoming daily.

"Charter schools at the high school level have generally been seen as alternative schools for at risk or under-performing students, so there are parents who are apprehensive about putting their trust in a 28-year-old guy who says, 'I'm going to get your child ready for college,' because they've heard these promises before and have been let down," said Barnett. "But we have a student population that is 98 ... 99 percent minority – 95 percent on free or reduced lunch – yet 20 percent are performing above proficiency and collectively they grew two points further on college preparedness."

The principal said he is also proud to say his school has very low incidence of discipline.

"We didn't have one fight last year," said Barnett, who said he prides himself on how he communicates with his students. "I don't yell at the kids because if I start yelling that means I have given up on trying to understand them."

Barnett said though students are off for the summer he is working on boosting enrollment for the coming school year. He said his goal is to mature to annual graduating classes of 120.

"We have an open door policy. All we ask is that students come in and have an ultimate goal of being able to go to college," said Barnett.