

# The Times

## Suburban students learn what life's like in inner city schools

Wednesday, July 22, 2009

**STAFF WRITER**

EWING -- At 19, Deborah Prendergast has seen things no teen should see.

The Trenton native has witnessed people get beaten up. She has seen people get shot.

At 15, Prendergast dropped out of Emily Fisher Charter School. At 16, she went to Trenton Central High School-West for a few months before transferring to Isles YouthBuild Institute, an alternative school, where Prendergast hopes to receive her high school diploma and then become an ultrasound technician.

"We're not what everyone else thinks of us, that we're just regular urban kids that don't want to come to school. And if we do come to school, we drop out, have babies," Prendergast said. "There's students that want to get out of the urban environment, that want an education."

Teachers, said Prendergast, serve as a lifeline: helping students become proud of their work and continue their education.

Prendergast and other Trenton teens recently shared their stories with a group of high school juniors, most of them from suburban districts, who want to become teachers, possibly in urban districts.

Forty nine high school juniors from two dozen area high schools, including Ewing, Hightstown, Trenton Central and Lawrence, participated in the two-week intensive program, which wrapped up last Friday. They learned about the plight of urban students like Prendergast. They also learned about the impact of gangs in schools and the shortages of teachers in areas like math, science, technology, special education, world languages and English as a second language. They volunteered at an area soup kitchen and taught a class of fourth-graders.

Dubbed the Urban Teacher Academy, the two-week program at The College of New Jersey was designed to "attract students to teaching in high poverty schools or in content areas for which there are critical teacher shortages," according to the state Department of Education.

Takesha Richards, 17, a rising senior at Trenton Central High School-West who participated in the summer academy, said being a teacher "is one of the nobler professions." Richards wants to be a high school teacher in an urban area because "they need good teachers to help them prepare for college." She also wants to teach classes at a community college.

Like Prendergast, Richards has seen students who don't come to class pass with "C's" and "D's." Richards said she was glad her suburban counterparts heard from Prendergast and her peers because teachers have to be aware of gang-related issues and poverty.

"It's different to actually see students that went through it. ... Everyone's left with a better understanding," Richards said.

Ryan McMichael, of Lawrence High School, learned that a teacher's day doesn't end at 3 p.m. because teachers sometimes stay after school to ensure students get the academic attention they need.

"Some of these students need to feel someone cares for them," said McMichael, 17, who wants to teach in an urban district. After participating in the academy, he feels teaching inner city students is "more appealing" because he wants to make a difference.

But there is a well-known shortage of teachers in urban areas. The drop-out rate of new teachers is close to 50 percent in the first three years, said Steve Wollmer, a spokesman for the New Jersey Education

Association.

"Urban districts ... have much higher hurdles in terms of attracting and retaining their teaching force," Wollmer said. "A lot of newer younger teachers find it too challenging."

Urban areas produce a higher percentage of youngsters coming from broken or single-parent homes and more students who have problems that stem from poverty, Wollmer said.

Though the need for teachers in New Jersey is great, there are fewer shortages than in other states, said Rich Vespucci, a state Department of Education spokesman. In 1985, the state Department of Education initiated an alternate route for teacher certification, in which individuals who did not major in education but had at least a bachelor's degree could become a teacher without going back to school, he said.

TCNJ's Urban Teacher Academy started four years ago with help from a \$3 million federal teacher recruitment grant. Since its inception four years ago, about 74 percent of the participants have continued on to teacher-preparation programs, said Larry Fieber, TCNJ's urban recruitment coordinator.

Lillian Ruffo, an elementary education and English major at TCNJ, participated in the Urban Teacher Academy during the summer of 2006.

"I always wanted to be a teacher, but I was not sure where I wanted to teach. The program opened my eyes to a new area where I could teach: inner cities," Ruffo said.

The academy, she said, took away a lot of the misconceptions she had about inner cities. Until then, she thought the children didn't want to learn and were delinquents. "They're not, and I saw that," said Ruffo, who graduates in 2011 and wants to work in Trenton or other urban areas.

©2009 Times of Trenton

© 2009 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.