

St. Paul Pioneer Press Editorial

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Backed by Gates, earned with sweat

Our high schools are the emotional centers of our communities. No one need list their many challenges. So we are pleased to hear stories of dreams, growth and change at several St. Paul high schools, stimulated by a chunk of change from Bill Gates.

Harding High School and Johnson High School, both on St. Paul's East Side, and Highland Park High School, serving the western end of the city, report a burst of innovation and creativity and some bottom-line improvements. All were beneficiaries of grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The money is running out but the creativity won't. The schools received more than \$2.5 million over a five-year period, which helped retrain staff and reshape these large schools into groupings of smaller schools-within-a-school. Because the Gates money bought time instead of staff, many of the programs will continue.

"It's been a great five years," said Johnson principal Kay Arndt. "We've had the opportunity to do things I've never dreamed of."

Johnson Senior High School. (1,600 students) The focus has been on ensuring that every graduate leaves school with a plan for post-secondary study. Teams of teachers visited successful school programs in Texas and Oregon, and eight sub-schools, known as academies, were created.

The academies focused on such topics as architecture and engineering; arts and communications; business and marketing; health sciences; hospitality and tourism; and natural resources and sciences. All students were required to complete a senior project, and Arndt said, "They all rose to the occasion."

Harding Senior High School. (2,300 students) For Harding, which is building on an educational partnership with 3M, the Gates funding came at a pivotal point and opened "a variety of possibilities," said principal Todd Hochman.

Harding has academies devoted to fine arts, human services, medical and

environmental studies, and engineering and industrial technology. The funding helped push along changes that included more autonomy for the academies and improved training for teachers and administrators.

Highland

Park Senior High School. (1,450 students) Principal Efe Agbamu said more teachers have been trained to teach the international baccalaureate classes so more students can be exposed to "a rigorous, challenging curriculum."

Highland Park is organized into three academies focused on technology and science, liberal arts and world health and human services. With the Gates funding, there has been a greater focus on students' working with individual advisors. "This is personalizing high school," Agbamu said.

Joe Nathan, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for School Change, which administered the grants for the Gates Foundation, said the three schools operated under fixed goals. These included an emphasis on the schools-within-a-school concept; programs that were open to all students; an emphasis on close, personal connections between students and advisers; and a focus on increasing preparation of students for higher education.

Follow-up studies compiled by the center demonstrate that the three high schools have done better than the district as a whole in several critical areas, Nathan said.

Graduation:

Between 2002 and 2005, four-year completion rate increased 9 percent at Highland Park and 14 percent at Johnson, well above the 5 percent increase in the district as a whole. Harding's percentage remained steady and fell slightly below the district's percentage.

Test

results: Between 2002 and 2006, the percentage of students passing the 10th-grade writing test increased 10 percent at Highland Park, 9 percent at Johnson and 3 percent at Harding. The district average increase was 3 percent.

Racial gaps: In completion rates, higher-education enrollment rates and in graduation tests, African-American students at the "Gates" schools often showed more improvement than in the district as a whole.

"We think there's really exciting news here," said Nathan. "Not only was the achievement gap narrowed, but overall, achievement and graduation rates improved."

We think that's a real cause for encouragement."

Kwame

McDonald, associate director of the reform project for the Center for School Change, said the changes remain a "work in progress." He said the administrators and teachers working on the Gates project proved themselves. "These are a group of people who care about kids," he said.

The Gates money did not buy instant success. But just as we dream for our children, our schools must pursue their visions. We thank the Gates Foundation for giving them the opportunity to do so. And we salute inspired and innovative educators everywhere involved in the daily struggles of high school life.

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