

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

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JA offers a helping hand

Students get view of college

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TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER—Willberto Escobar wants to study culinary arts. Jillisa Johnson hopes to become a lawyer.

Both are juniors at South High Community School and part of the group of students selected for the Junior Achievement Academy Partnership that officials hope will make collegiate and professional goals come true.



This week marked the start of the 13-week partnership program at Worcester State College, in which 24 South High students will be spending two afternoons a week at the campus. Another academy, involving 15 Burncoat High School students, got under way Monday at Assumption College.

"We are targeting 100 percent high school graduation rate and 90 percent acceptance into a four-year institution," said Deb Hopkins, president of Junior Achievement of Central Massachusetts.

The programs target what is known as the

middle 50 percent of students, the population for which college is not necessarily the presumed successor to finishing high school, but who have the potential to flourish in the collegiate environment. With few exceptions, officials said, they would be the first in their family to go to college.

In addition to getting a student's-eye view of college life, participants will be exposed to careers beyond their academic training through partnerships with local institutions. Volunteers from UMass Memorial Medical Center and Hanover Insurance Co. will work with students in the academy, Ms. Hopkins said, with the hospital personnel linked to the South High students and Burncoat students are paired with Hanover representatives.

The students were picked from the district's Advancement Via Individual Determination program, which seeks to turn B- and C-students into A students who take Advanced Placement courses.

"Junior Achievement has a very long history of promoting career awareness and financial literacy in our schools," Worcester State College President Janelle Ashley said. "The academy will now take that mission a step further."

Worcester School Superintendent James A. Caradonio said the academy model encapsulates what he called "the new three Rs," of rigor, relevance and relationship.

Today's young people need to be more skilled because their global counterparts are more

skilled, Mr. Caradonio said. So students need to be taught the relevance of their rigorous lessons.

Hanover Insurance has been a supporter of the AVID program for several years...

"We've got to connect the dots," he said. "The 'because we said so' school doesn't work."

Linking with outside partners, like the colleges and businesses involved in this initiative, helps accomplish those goals, he said.

"We all can't do this alone," the superintendent said.

State Rep. John J. Binienda, D-Worcester, told the two dozen students in attendance Tuesday to make the most of the opportunities being presented to them.

"Everything you will do in your life will all be determined by the amount of education you receive," he said. "Seize the opportunity."

Hanover Insurance has been a supporter of the AVID program for several years, company spokesman Michael Buckley said, including designating a \$200,000 grant for the Burncoat community.

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Cheryl Lapriore, vice president of corporate relations for Hanover, said the company has tapped recent college graduates to work with the Burncoat students in the academy. The graduates serve as mentors and model the types of careers available after college.

Company employees also work with the rest of the AVID population at Burncoat, Ms. Lapriore said.

Monica Lowell, vice president of community relations at UMass Memorial Medical Center, told the South High students that numerous career opportunities awaited them at the region's largest employer. The UMass Memorial Medical Center employs 12,000 people at its various campuses, she said, with professions ranging from health care to financial services.

For the students, this week's inaugural events included tours of the college campuses. In future weeks they will be exposed to all facets

of college life, including sitting in on classes and workshops on admissions and financial aid. The hope, officials said, is to eliminate some of the barriers that would keep these students from attending college. At the same time, the participants will gain insights into the business world.

"The unique volunteer pairings of undergraduates and corporate leaders, coupled with the learning experiences that are available on college campuses, will expose students to post-secondary educational and career options," according to program literature. "For most participating students, their experience in JA Academy will be the first time they have ever been on a college campus, worked in a college classroom or have had the opportunity to converse with high-level business executives."

When it is fully implemented, the program will last three years, starting in the students' sophomore year. Volunteers from local

businesses will deliver the "Success Skills" curriculum during a 10-session course, after which 15 students from each school will be invited to participate in the JA Academy program for their junior and senior years.

The selections will be made by business volunteers and high school guidance counselors.

For the juniors, the program will ultimately include the "JA Titan" program, in which they will learn about running a business through an online simulation. As seniors, participants will organize and operate an actual business, with the election of officers, development of a business plan and management of daily operations.