

Emerging Scholars Program Seeks to Ready Participants for Their Futures

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Flint Hill School's Emerging Scholars Program isn't limited to academics. Its instructors also inculcate a state of mind and a set of cultural values.

When students get off the bus, they shake hands with their counselors and call them "Miss" or "Mister." One student holds open the door for the others, who must look at him or her in the eye and say "Thank you."

Students mix up their seating to avoid forming cliques and at morning meetings talk openly about lessons they've learned - sometimes to their embarrassment.

"We tell the students we expect them to fail," said Alvarez LeCesne, the program's executive director. "That's how you learn. Admit it and acknowledge it. We're trying to build resilient kids. They'll continue toward their goal and become the leaders we need."

LeCesne, a former trial lawyer and IRS agent - "I'm working my way back into heaven," he jokes - joined the program in 2002.

"We're empowering students, transforming lives and building leaders," he said.

The program's goal is to help students enroll in preparatory schools when they reach the sixth grade. Thirteen of the program's students went on to private schools in 2004, 10 in 2005 and eight last year.

"The culture of each school is very different," said Education Director Ruth Heath. "We try to place the students based on their style of learning."

Planning for the program began in 2000, when former Flint Hill Head of School Thomas Whitworth and several other area prep-school leaders decided to emulate New York City's successful "Prep to Prep" program for needs-based students.

Seven schools founded the program, which graduated its first class in 2004.

Episcopal High School in Alexandria hosted the program for its first three years. This summer it moved to Flint Hill School, where it's been embraced by new Flint Hill Head of School John Thomas, LeCesne said.

The program fields between 50 and 70 applicants for 16 openings every year; this year's class has 14 members. The students come from Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.



Peter Szeremeta, a senior counselor with the Emerging Scholars Program at Flint Hill School, works with Damien Jones of Alexandria to solve a math problem. (Photo by Brian Trompeter)

Students are not granted automatic admission to the prep schools, but must qualify academically like other applicants.

Program leaders select students based on financial need, but high costs and increased social expectations lead some young people to turn down the opportunity to attend prep school.

Each Emerging Scholars class, known as a cohort in homage to the closely knit Roman legion units, begins with a seven-week summer session when the students are rising fifth-graders. It continues with Saturday classes during their fifth-grade school year and follows up with another seven-week session the next summer.

Technology teacher Dany Garcia, a former Fairfax County Public Schools instructor, said the program's voluntary nature means children who participate want to be there.

"When you teach, you can see it in their eyes and their participation," he said. "It rejuvenates me, too."

Language-arts instructor Dionne Osuji, now in her first summer with the program, is a teacher with Loudoun County Public Schools.

Osuji, who went through a similar program when she was in high school, said Emerging Scholars students get more individual attention.

"The students are so bright, so ready to learn," she said. "It's really rewarding for a teacher to work with a small group and see them develop so fast."

Students in Osuji's class must learn to set forth ideas clearly in writing, back up their points with facts and rewrite the final version so that it reads smoothly. Their final project will be a two-page typed essay.

This summer marks that second year that Peter Szeremeta, 16, of Oakton has assisted with the Emerging Scholars Program. Szeremeta, a senior counselor who is a rising senior at Flint Hill School, said working with the program is a meaningful way of spending his summer break.

"To thrive at an independent school, you need to be able to organize and prioritize," he said. "These kids have these abilities. They just have to refine their academic skills a little bit."

Daylan Cole, a 10-year-old student from Leesburg, said the program pushes her hard academically.

"We get more challenges, more homework than in our regular schools," she said. "I know it will help me when I get bigger."