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Students, teachers, principals making a difference



Junior Lynn Arthur celebrates after stripping a wire in Tom Connors' Cox Academy class at West Florida High School of Advanced Technology.

Photo by Michael Spooneybarger / Spooney@Studer.com

A look at bright spots in education

West Florida High School is Escambia County's only consistent "A"-rated school, with test scores and graduation rates higher than all other county high schools. While the School District's overall graduation rate reached 66 percent last year, West Florida's graduation rate — at 94 percent — is one of the highest in the U.S.

Hundreds of miles northeast of Pensacola, North Charleston High School in South Carolina has shown some of the highest gains in test scores and graduation rates in the state. With a minority enrollment of 95 percent, and nearly all students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, North Charleston is shining a bright light in education.

Pensacola Education Report

This is the second of a three-part report on local education by the staffs of the Studer Community Institute and PensacolaToday.com

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CITIZEN-POWERED CHANGE



Principal Robert Grimm believes that building relationships and helping students realize their value are keys to improving education. "Every student can learn. It's our responsibility to find out how they learn, what we can do differently, and then to do it," says Grimm.

When education is a priority, every child can learn

By Reggie Dogan
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Photos by Darrin Todd Little

Robert Grimm arrived at North Charleston High School in 2011 with a crystal clear picture of the looming challenges facing a new principal.

Literacy rates were lamentable, discipline problems ran rampant and an abysmal 43.5 percent of students graduated in four years.

Another challenge, no less daunting: Sticking around long enough to see his improvement plan reach its fruition.

North Charleston High School changed principals like the weather. Seven in 11 years had come and gone before him.

"They called it, 'The principal-killer school,'" says Grimm, a wry smile breaking across his narrow face framed beneath a close-cropped crew cut.

"This is where they go to die."

In 2012, the Grim Reaper came knocking on Grimm's door. Rated "at-risk" for three consecutive years, North Charleston was on the brink of closure.

Grimm drove to Columbia, the state capital, to plead his case to the South Carolina Department of Education.

Grimm didn't think he said much, but whatever he said, they liked it.

"I assured them that we would make progress," says Grimm, who became the school's first principal in more than a decade to last past two years.

"It's unfair to label the students without giving them an opportunity to have a leader who's going to help them along the way."

True to his word, Grimm has been an impetus for change and improvement at North Charleston High School.

With the help of dedicated teachers and diligent students, Grimm has helped students at the at-risk, perennially low-performing school achieve the highest learning gains in the Charleston County School District.

North Charleston High

The relatively small school in the historic district of North Charleston in the past three years has outperformed all six high schools in the city.

Grimm credits the school's success mostly to setting benchmarks, analyzing data, recognizing and focusing on at-risk issues.

Grimm welcomed the help from Pensacola-based Studer Education in his efforts to improve the school.

Janet Pilcher, Studer Education senior executive, said she worked with Grimm while providing training to School District leaders.

She's been impressed that Grimm, in his four years as principal, has improved scores on Studer Education's employee engagement survey from an average of 3.50 to 4.15 out of a 5.

"He recognized talent, rewarded high performance and set high expectations for all teachers to follow," Pilcher said. "He has recruited a team of teachers who have great passion and do worthwhile work."

Grimm said he uses the feedback to

make adjustments at North Charleston. "It's not all positive, but I'm constantly striving to get better scores because it makes them happy," Grimm says. "If the teachers are happy, I'm doing a good job."

Most of all, he cites the importance of hiring and retaining great teachers.

Working in education is a special calling that requires ordinary people willing to go extraordinarily above and beyond the call of duty.

At North Charleston that means meeting students' needs before school, after school, visiting their homes or trying to find a place for them to call home.

Sometimes it means getting a child a hot meal or warm clothing. Or Christmas presents and Thanksgiving dinners.

The school has a federally funded afternoon, after-school dinner program for students who may be hungry or homeless.

There are tutors for students who needed more help in certain areas. On occasion, teachers have pooled money to buy a suit for a child to attend a family member's funeral.

"Looking at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, if they need something on the bottom of the triangle in order to be successful on the top, we provide whatever is on the bottom," Grimm says.

One of the most important things a principal can do, Grimm says, is hire and retain the best teachers to do the best job possible to inspire, engage and embrace students who need someone to show them along the way. Tony Eady is among his finest, Grimm says.

Eady is one of the few teachers Grimm kept on staff when he took over as principal.

Using the data to get better

The first Student Concern Specialist in the district, Eady has worn many hats in his 22 years at North Charleston.

Among the skeptics when Grimm became principal, Eady says he watched the school change for the better.

"I've been here a long time, at its worst and at its best," says Eady, explaining his job as the "eyes and ears for the principal."

"Mr. Grimm has moved that standard way up, and he holds everybody accountable, making sure you involve yourself with the kids."

For Grimm, it's all about his students, each day, every day.

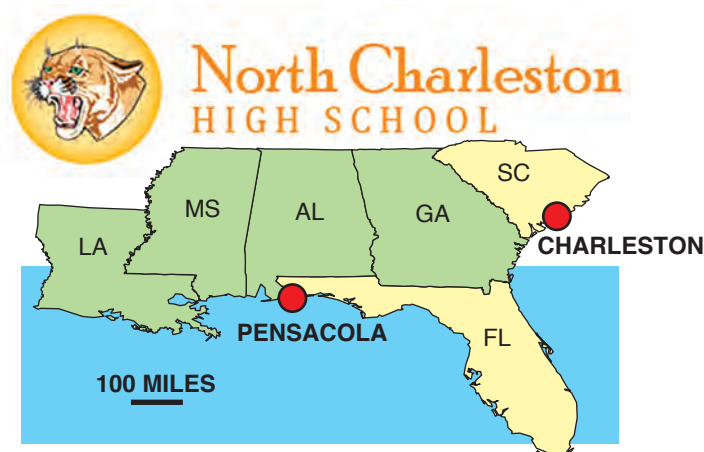
He wants to know where they live and how they live. Whatever he can do to help them succeed in school and in life, he wants to try to do it, he says.

Part of that requires tracking students through databases that provide a profile to track academic progress and proficiency, as well as finding any deficiencies or detriments that could hinder their chance of succeeding.

A former math teacher, Grimm crunches numbers and tears data apart.

Teachers examine every student in every class to find out where students live, how they live and the best approach to help them learn and improve.

"We're constantly searching for new and improved ways to assist kids,"



Tale of two Charlestons

The state's third-largest city, North Charleston ranks just behind neighboring Historic Charleston, about a 20-minute drive away.

With a population of 105,000, the demographics are almost evenly split: 48 percent white and 45 percent black. The median household income is \$37,716.

One of the country's oldest cities, Historic Charleston was founded in 1670 and is known for its Southern charm, antebellum homes, distinctive neighborhoods and historic tourist sites.

It remains one of the largest ports on the East Coast. Its economy relies heavily on tourism. More than 4 million people visit Charleston each year, making it one of the top tourist destinations in the U.S.

If Historic Charleston is the place to visit and play, North Charleston is the place to work, shop and stay.

While the two cities have things in com-

mon, including history and a name, North Charleston is the economic hub, leading the county in economic and industrial development.

Incorporated in 1972, North Charleston is an old military, distinctively blue-collar town. It is home to the old Charleston Navy Base, Naval Weapons Station, Air Force Base, International Airport and dozens of businesses and industries with the name Charleston in it.

North Charleston's favorite son is Art Shell, former NFL coach, Hall of Famer and Super Bowl champion with the Oakland Raiders.

The closing of the navy base and other downsizing drove the economy down and crime up.

The economy has rebounded in recent years with the arrival of shipping and manufacturing, including the new Boeing plant and a Tanger Outlet Center. The area boasts one of the highest retail sales figures in the state.

Grimm says. "If what we're doing, we stay stagnant, then we stop doing it and try something different. We're constantly striving to get better."

The numbers — and the rest of the story

Despite the immense challenges, Grimm refused to make excuses.

He doesn't want anyone else to use the racial and economic disparity gap as an excuse to accept low performance and under achievement in schools.

"Don't tell me that students can't learn, because every student can learn," says Grimm. "It's our responsibility to find out how they learn, what we can do differently, and then to do it."

Whatever they are doing, it's been working. Since 2011:

■ The End-of-Course rate soared from 26 percent to 66 percent.

■ The High School Assessment Program rate — until this year a requirement for graduation — increased from 48 percent to 61 percent.

■ The enrollment in Advanced Placement courses went up nearly 12 percent, to 22.7 percent. The median high school average is 15.3 percent. Attendance is more than 96 percent.

■ Suspensions are almost non-existent, at 1.1 percent.

The improvements are more than statistics. It's about changing a culture of failure and showing that schools that serve at-risk, disadvantaged students

can make the grade and strive for success.

While the graduation rate in 2014 remained relatively low at 54 percent, it's up 10.5 percent points since 2011.

Those numbers, Grimm says, are deceptive because many of the students who come in as freshmen transfer to other schools in the district or the country, but the state still counts them against the school graduation totals.

The school has been rated At-Risk for more than decade.

Even that can be misleading, Grimm says.

North Charleston missed moving up to Below Average by one student's test scores.

If four students had earned a passing grade, the school's rating would have climbed to Average.

"The way the state calculates grades puts us at a significant and unfair disadvantage," Grimm says. "We have to overcome some barriers that other schools don't have to overcome."

Grimm was well aware of the obstacles before he took the helm as principal.

North Charleston High School had a bad reputation. Most of it, frankly, was true.

How the students see it

Enrollment at North Charleston High has dropped from about 1,300 in 2002 to 485 this year.

The cost to run the school has

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remained about the same, from \$7.29 million then to \$7 million now.

Coming from mostly low-income neighborhoods, many of the students face astronomical odds before entering the school building.

Some go hungry. Few get proper dental and medical care. Too many are transient, bouncing from home to home. If they aren't lucky enough to find a family or friend's couch, they end up sleeping on floors or in cars.

Another problem Grimm faced was keeping students from leaving the school.

Some North Charleston parents lost faith in the school. They pulled their children out to send them to Wando High School, which boasts a graduation rate of 88 percent.

Even though his parents were against it, Noah Johnson transferred to North Charleston High from a larger school two years ago.

Taking courses in AP calculus and macroeconomics, Johnson has a 3.7 grade-point average.

Johnson said he would rank his teachers among the best in the country, stressing that the courses are rigorous and challenging.

"I love this school," says Johnson, a senior, who is on his way to college to become a mechanical engineer. "It has made me a better person. Not everything people say is true."

Senior Nykeil Miller came to the school as a freshman. Miller used to play hooky, fight and stay in trouble. She's witnessed the school's meteoric rise and improvements in academics and discipline under Grimm's leadership.

"He took an interest in me personally and turned me around," says Miller, who will graduate with her freshman class on time and wants to become a digital graphic designer. "Coming in, Mr. Grimm started changing the whole school."

Smart hires are key

An important part of the transformation took place before Grimm walked through the door.

It started with hiring the right teachers with the right attitude and temperament to deal with at-risk students with baggage and burdens to carry, Grimm says.

He essentially turned over 90 percent of the staff on his watch.

Part of the interviewing process involves asking poignant questions to feel out the candidate and determine if they fit in with his mission and goal.

Every person he picks, from the data clerk on up, he puts the students in mind, Grimm says.

He dismisses what he calls "pat" answers, when candidates talk about impoverished families, learning disabilities, peer pressure or trying to make a difference.

He wants teachers who understand the dynamics they face and will work to find solutions, instead of pointing out problems.

"If they don't give me, 'Sometimes it's my fault as a teacher, I'm not reaching the students, I've not established a relationship with the students, I've not given them what they need in order to feel safe and secure in my classroom, I've not tried 50 different teaching strategies,' then I don't consider them," he says. "Because, more often than not, it is our fault."

Miasha Wilder knew she was the right person for the job when Grimm hired her out of college three years ago.

A guidance counselor with a master's degree, Wilder grew up in a struggling, low-income household and attended Title I schools where most of the students were eligible for subsidized lunches.

"If I can, you can," are words framed on the wall in her office.

"He hired me because I had the energy and passion and the desire to help them become better students and people," Wilder says.

Teachers who embrace the calling

North Charleston High is a small school in a big building. Down the pristine, gleaming hallways, up the stairs,



Principal Robert Grimm stops to chat up a student in the hallway at North Charleston High School. He tries to keep close tabs on his students' progress in the classroom and in their home lives.

Race, poverty and school scores

Across the country, in school districts not much different than those in Escambia and Charleston counties, race and income are prevailing indicators for their success or failure.

Escambia County School District's overall graduation rate has risen from 56 percent in 2009 to 64 percent in 2014.

Less than half of the district's African-American students graduate in four years.

In Charleston County School District the graduation rate since 2007 has increased from 61 percent to about 80 percent in 2014.

During the same period the overall graduation for African-American students rose from 60 percent to 72 percent.

The Charleston district moved up from the previous year's ranking of "good," to score "excellent" on the state report card released in November.

The district's growth rate also increased from average to good.

The education department's annual report cards, as part of its accountability system, rate schools and districts from At-Risk to Excellent.

It usually is axiomatic that schools that

serve mostly low-income, disadvantaged students receive lower grades in state-wide accountability measures.

Despite desegregation and efforts to seek diversity, blacks and whites in the Lowcountry, still live mostly apart, because of choice or long-existing income disparities. Most public schools serve the neighborhoods around them. Areas of North Charleston are mostly black; so are those schools.

Of nearly 500 students at North Charleston High School, 95 percent are African American, mostly from low-income families. Nearby Academic Magnet High School is 99 percent white, mostly from middle-income and affluent families.

Serving mostly low-income, predominately minority students poses greater challenges to schools.

Unstable and transient families make it even more difficult to keep students in school and keep track of those who leave.

North Charleston High School is no exception.

In the first quarter this year, North Charleston lost about 100 students, Grimm says.

empty desks rest in dark classrooms, the result of dwindling enrollment over the past decade.

Up the stairs on the third floor, a booming voice can be heard at the end of the quiet, empty hallway.

Inside a classroom, history teacher Anthony Ludwig scoots back and forth, up and down the aisle between desks, reading a document from the Destruction of Maine, an American battleship that exploded in the Havana harbor in 1898.

Pictures of presidents past and present, history makers, world maps, and laminated newspaper articles of historic news events are plastered on the walls.

Ludwig pauses at a student's desk, leans in close to drive home a point in the lesson.

"What happened? Who did they talk to?" he asks the student, with a thick Northern accent.

He crouches to check an answer, before dashing to the front of the class to continue his lecture.

Eyes and ears follow every step. "These students are unbelievably talented, but kids have to be told that," says Ludwig, a Philadelphia native, who has been at the school four years.

He went to college north of Charleston in Myrtle Beach, S.C. He applied at more than 70 schools in 11 states, before Mr. Grimm found a rare talent.

"He's one of my best teachers," Grimm says. "He relates to students, and they are smart enough to see that he cares about them as humans."

Ludwig recalled during his first week of teaching when a student was giving him some grief. He threatened to call

the boy's parents.

"He said, 'Both of my parents are locked up, so what you gonna do?'"

Another student had just had a baby with no parent at home to help out.

"It's heartbreaking," Ludwig says. "It's tough to get kids to understand the South American War and they didn't get any sleep the night before."

"I do whatever it takes to get it done," he says. "As long as I'm needed and making a difference, I will be here."

Helpful hires

Grimm gives high marks to his teachers for helping the school shed its nasty reputation.

Hallways, once filled with boisterous disruptions, now give way to order and restraint.

Eady recollects a different place at a different time a few years ago.

His job was to keep the students moving between classes. It was bedlam, Eady says, as the mass of students rushed through the hall, pushing, shoving and fighting.

All he could do was helplessly stand against the wall and watch. "For a couple of years, I was around here doing nothing, just standing here watching them tear this school to the ground," Eady says. "Mr. Grimm came in, got his people in place and turned things around."

Eady says the principal is hands-on, in the hallways and in the classrooms. He doesn't sit behind a desk giving directions.

"The key to being a good leader is that everybody knows that you're a leader, but you don't have to announce it," says Eady. "He jokes and has a good time, but

we all know when it's time for business."

When the bell rings, a gaggle of students hustle from their class for lunch.

Grimm grabs his two-way radio and steps out of his dimly light office into the bright lights of the hallway, twirling a key chain that dangled from his faded jeans beneath his tan sport coat.

Gregarious and affable, he makes his way through the school's cavernous cafeteria, shaking hands and slapping high fives like a politician on a stump.

He offers a smile, a laugh or a pat on the back for almost every student in his path. He rattles off questions about issues at homes as often as he probes for answers about school.

"How's your father?" asks Grimm, stopping a student in the hallway. "Why didn't you tell me he was in the hospital?"

"Rom-u-lus!" says Grimm, bumping fists and laughing with the gangly sophomore. "The coolest name I've ever heard!"

A crooked smile breaks on Romulus Townes' face. He relishes the attention and being a part of the school family.

"He's not the type who acts like he runs the school," says Townes. "He acts like family. I don't see him as a principal."

Like many of his classmates, Townes hasn't lived on Easy Street. He arrived in Charleston a few years ago from the rough-and-tumble city life of Atlanta.

He's bounced from place to place, living with one member of the family to the another. He has lived in group homes most of his 15 years, a wounded teenager, searching for someone to trust, some place to call home.

"If I need something, I can always count come to them," Townes says. "They've helped me in more ways than one."

It is students like Townes that Grimm has in mind when he looks for a teacher. They need to be ready as a nurse, a counselor, a psychologist and a friend, he says.

"I let them know that they are going to be more than just a teacher," Grimm says. "If you're not comfortable doing that, then don't come, because you're not doing me any good. And if you're not doing me any good, you're not serving the children."

'Prove you care'

In the fourth and final year of his contract, Grimm wants to continue his plan and reach higher goals.

He wants a graduation rate of 100 percent. He's focusing on raising scores on standardized test. The At-Risk rating is not acceptable.

Grimm admits that the first couple of years were rough. He had to prove to the students, their parents and the community that he wasn't just some new guy on the block seeking a paycheck and a pension.

"They don't care unless you prove you care," Grimm says. "We're going to get better and better, and hopefully the next person can continue to do good work."



Juniors Brandon Kecker and Allison Woodfin try stripping speaker wire in Tom Connors' Cox Academy class at West Florida High School of Advanced Technology.

West Florida Tech

Is this the make and model for success in high school?

By William Rabb
Photos by Michael Spoonerberger

If traditional high schools are like practical, safe family sedans and v-tech schools are like work trucks, then West Florida High School in Pensacola is a combination of the two – and then some.

Think of it as a four-door pickup with plenty of room for the family in the cab, but with an extended cargo bed, a tool box, a ladder rack and a winch for getting the job done.

The waiting list for this model is growing every year.

“It just makes a lot of sense to do it that way. It gives students so much of a choice if they want to go into a career or continue on to college,” said Tommy Tait, a Pensacola bank president who is credited with cranking the starter on the West Florida career academy concept more than 18 years ago.

The school, on Longleaf Drive in northwest Pensacola, goes by the official name of West Florida High School of Advanced Technology. It is Escambia County's only consistent “A”-rated school, with test scores and graduation rates that far outpace all other high schools in the county.

While the districtwide, four-year graduation rate reached 66 percent last year, West Florida clocked in at 94 percent – one of the highest rates in the country.

“I have to say it really mentally prepares you for the work force – if you're going off to college or straight to work,” said Alex Allen, who graduated from West Florida in 2006 and went to work at Gulf Power Co.'s Crist Plant generating facility. He plans to finish his bachelor's degree in engineering in the next few years.

The accolades for West Florida raise two questions: What's the secret to its success; and why aren't more – or all – local high schools employing this method?

The answers to both questions are multifaceted, and bounded by national trends, local needs, and state and local funding for public education.

Concept seems simple

The idea behind a career academy is forehead-slapping in its clarity.

Students combine hands-on technical training with rigorous academics. One side fuels the other. Instead of simply memorizing algebraic theorems without seeing the practical applications, students use the math as part of their technical projects.

“What they're doing is completely algebra, but they think it's just part of the electrical work, then they go back and ace their math test,” said Jennifer Landrum Grove, Gulf Power's community development manager who helped launch the Gulf Power Academy at West Florida in 2001.

The academy concept applies to a wide range of career fields: A construction student, for example, would get practical training in building with concrete in the lab.

In chemistry class, she studies the chemical makeup of concrete and what makes some batches stronger than others.

In English class, she may write a newsletter for her fellow construction



After graduating from West Florida High School in 2006, Alex Allen now is a plant control operator at the Gulf Power Crist Plant in Pensacola. He is pursuing an engineering degree.

students. By her senior year, she's built a model house and worked a semester in the industry. At graduation, she's prepared to go on to college, or directly into the workforce, already trained in the skills she needs.

She's also earned an industry certification, which means that even if she decides to enter college, her summer job in her chosen industry will pay significantly more.

A 2008 study by a research organization started by the Ford Foundation noted that nationwide, career academy graduates earn up to 17 percent more than non-academy workers in the same field. That can add up to more than \$30,000 over eight years.

Building a new model

Career academies began about 40 years ago, when business leaders around the country started noticing a shortage of skilled labor and workers who could meet the needs of an increasingly technical, automated and globally influenced workplace, according to the National Career Academy Coalition.

The concept was slow to spread across the nation, but was spurred by the seminal 1983 report “A Nation at Risk,” which galvanized a national movement for education reform.

In the late 1990s, Tait and a group of Pensacola-area business and industry leaders met with then-Escambia School Superintendent Jim May and Lesa Morgan, who was the director of the George Stone Technical Center, a vocational training school on Longleaf Drive.

For years, vocational students from all

Escambia high schools had done “share time” at George Stone – commuting to the center just for a few classes a week, Morgan said.

The career academy model would have them at a technical center every day, all year long. For more than a year, Morgan and district officials researched the concept, traveling to notable schools all around the country.

For another year, school officials recruited local business and industry leaders to get onboard with the plan by providing financial support or pledging internships for students.

By using part of the George Stone campus instead of building a new school, the district saved millions of dollars, Morgan said. By 2001, West Florida was ready to launch, and Morgan was named principal.

Since then, the district has created more than 55 smaller career academies at the other six high schools, where some, but not all, students specialize in their chosen field.

West Florida is the only “wall-to-wall” career academy, where every student is enrolled in one of 12 career fields, for all four years.

At the Gulf Power Academy at West Florida, for example, students interested in the field of electrical generation and power management must complete what's known as a capstone project.

Allen, who grew up in Cantonment, not far from Crist Plant, had been in love with electricity since he was a child. For his capstone, he built a model house, wired it for electricity to meet building regulations, then wrote a paper

on the national electrical code.

In his senior year, he trained at Gulf Power for his first semester, then worked there in a paid position in his final semester. He was then hired full-time after graduation. The utility has hired 50 other graduates from West Florida in the last 14 years, Grove said.

A big part of West Florida's success comes from the fact that students have at least one teacher who teaches them for all four years of high school, allowing that teacher to mentor the teenagers through their most formative period.

“If you think back to your high school days, you might have had a teacher for one year, then never see them again,” said Eric Smith, principal at West Florida since 2010.

“One of the things we know about successful schools is that they have relationships with their students, and one of the advantages to the career academy is they have one or two instructors that follow those kids all four years,” said Cathy Boehme, who taught science at West Florida from the beginning.

Draw of a magnet school

Another reason why West Florida, a magnet school, has earned an A rating for eight straight years is the caliber of students who attend.

Students must apply in the winter of their eighth-grade year, and must meet certain criteria. The school does not look at standardized test scores, but applicants must maintain a “C” average, a good attendance record, and must have no serious discipline problems.

Even then, the school receives 800 to 1,000 applicants each year, and has room for only about 350 incoming freshmen. A lottery determines which of the qualified applicants are accepted, Morgan said.

“All of that means we have parents who are very involved, which makes a difference,” Morgan said.

Not every student comes from a middle-class, involved-parent home, administrators are quick to point out.

One student in the mid-2000s showed great promise at school, but was frequently tardy. The school was ready to expel him when, at his appeal, he explained he had no home, and was sleeping in a car.

He couldn't charge his cell phone at night, and had no alarm to wake him up, said Lori Anderson, workforce education specialist with the district, who worked closely with the student.

Administrators gave the young man another chance, helped him find some meal tickets for lunches at school, a place to stay – and an alarm clock. He went on to full-time employment at Gulf Power, where he works today.

“I don't know where he would be today if he hadn't have been here at West Florida,” Anderson said. “I ran into him last summer, and he was still so grateful for the chance he was given.”

The career-academy approach also means that kids at age 13 are making the biggest decision of their lives, deciding what type of career they want to pursue.

Initially, West Florida allowed freshmen to rotate through various fields before making a choice. But district budget cuts eliminated some classes and teachers, forcing students to pick

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School literally changed TaDarius Hall's life

By Mollye Barrows

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Photo by Michael Spooneybarger

People like being around TaDarius Hall.

His peers at Pensacola High School elected him to the Homecoming Court twice and voted him freshman class president.

Kind, charismatic and wise beyond his years, Hall has been through a lot in his young life.

"What I'm learning through my life is just because you're impacted by something, doesn't mean you're affected by it," Hall says. "That's something that I will keep with me always."

Hall finds refuge at school. He appreciates the attention and love he receives from classmates and teachers. Given the realities of his life's predicaments, it's no wonder that theater is his favorite class at school.

"I appreciate the love and everything I get from my school," says Hall, as a humble smile broke on his face.

"When I'm having a hard day, this is my way to escape everything, because I love being on stage," says Hall in the auditorium where he enjoys his theater class. "I've wanted to be an actor since I was 3."

Hall is familiar with "hard days," but you wouldn't know it just by talking to him. He has many reasons on paper to be a statistic — another young man's promise and future lost in the circumstances of his environment.

But he isn't that kid.

He maintained an A average at Bellview Middle School, earning a recommendation for the exclusive, academically rigorous International Baccalaureate program at PHS.

Longtime teacher and IB assistant principal Al Marsh first met Hall when he was working at Bellview and Hall was a student.

Marsh says he quickly noticed a difference in Hall. At school, Hall always dressed well, unlike some of his classmates, where the boys wore sagging pants, and the girls like low-cut blouses.

"He's a perfect role model for the other students there," Marsh says. "He is a cut above the rest."

Marsh knows well the neighborhoods — Montclair and Truman Arms — where Hall grew up. He has taught dozens of



TaDarius Hall, a sophomore at Pensacola High School, practices for the spring musical "Anything Goes," a production that will be put on by the Theatre Troop 4760. In the background is Justin Polk also a sophomore.

children from the same areas and knew Hall was special.

"There is just something in him that shows he wants to excel," Marsh says. "He wants to do the right thing all the time."

Marsh describes Hall as an all-around great person.

"He's a nice young man who I think is going to be successful at anything he takes on," Marsh says. "I don't know what it is that makes him do the right thing, whereas others coming from the same environment won't do the same thing."

Living with 'hard days'

Hall remembers the years he lived at Truman Arms, but they aren't the best memories. Many days and nights he listened to sirens and watched cops make their rounds.

"You have walls around you and you actually feel like you're locked up," Hall says. "So I tried to go out of Truman Arms as much as I could, to get out of the whole situation. I've seen people do things in Truman Arms that I just wouldn't have imagined. It was just really difficult."



TaDarius Hall and his grandmother, Kasandra Leverette.

Hall's mother was only 15 years old when he was born. She went to prison when he was 9 years old. That's when he moved to the Montclair neighborhood to live with his grandmother, "Ms. Sandy," until she died.

"It was really, really hard, because there's not one person on this earth that I respected and I loved more than her," Hall says. "The reason I am the way I am is because of her. Once (her death) happened, I didn't care about school, I didn't care about my future."

With his mother in prison, his grandmother dead, and a father who "was there, but wasn't there," Hall fell into depression, made worse by the deaths of an uncle, aunt and other family members in a short span of time.

Hall found purpose in school. He realized it in a strange way: While putting on his school uniform.

"Would my grandma really want me to fail? If I'm really living for her, would she really want me to fail?" Hall says. "I felt like the school uniform (was a part) of who I was and who I was becoming. It changed my personality, it changed the way I looked at things, it changed the way I saw other people. School was like my outlet."

It was the change in Hall that inspired Marsh to recommend him for the IB program.

Hall this year struggled in his math and science classes and is no longer in IB. But he still takes honors classes and maintains an A-B average, while holding down a service job.

He is determined to pursue his dream.

"I am so excited about college," Hall says. "This year has not been my best year. I came to the IB program and Mr. Marsh and everyone else, they helped me out. They stuck their necks out for me. (But) I feel like I underestimated everything and didn't take it as seriously as I should. I also feel it was a learning experience."

Keeping faith in the next chapter

Hall now is focused more on his studies, as well as his acting and dance classes. His schoolwork inspires him, but his faith is the real flame that fuels his fire to overcome and succeed.

"I got saved about two years ago," Hall remembers, reaching for the cross pendant around his neck. "That's a big decision. It's a life-changing decision."

Hall knows the path ahead won't be easy just because he has learned some hard lessons. He hopes to share his life lessons and inspire his friends and classmates, who look up to him.

"For that kid who is out there and feeling like there is no hope for them, what you have to do is — it's kind of blunt to say it — you've have to suck it up, and you have to keep going," Hall says.

"No one's going to be sorry for you backing down. You have to keep pushing forward, and once you keep pushing forward people will take notice of that and God will open doors for you and he will use people in your life to push you forward."

Continued from page 4

one path by eighth grade.

"It was kind of a scheduling hassle to get them through the rotation, but I think the kids made better choices when they were more familiar with all the career fields," said Boehme, who last fall moved to Tallahassee to work with the Florida Education Association on policy development.

Others argue that even if students later decide not to pursue the career track, the academy approach has helped them find their way to a more desirable career, and has provided practical experience along the way.

"It's a good thing, because we've had that happen where some realize, 'Oh, I don't want to be a nurse because I'm going to pass out when I see blood,'" Morgan said.

West Florida junior Lynn Arthur agreed.

The Cox Telecommunications Academy at the school was her third choice, behind nursing and criminal justice. But now, she couldn't be happier with the choice, which she said has taught her not only technical video-wiring skills, but also critical problem-solving and teamwork skills as well.

When setting up networked video projectors in classrooms, "We ran into a lot of problems that we had to figure out," Arthur said. She now plans to go on to college, perhaps with a major in finance or business.

Doing a walk-around

A visit to the Cox Academy classroom at West Florida showed the problem-solving nature of the class.



Juniors Allison Woodfin, left, Taylor Jones and Cedric Moultrie try stripping speaker wire in Tom Connors' Cox Academy class at West Florida High School of Advanced Technology.

Instructor Tom Connors, who directed the training at Cox Communications for years before becoming a teacher, showed students how to "do a work-around" — solving a common real-world problem — when setting up an audio-video system and the manufacturer hasn't provided enough speaker wire.

The students learned to convert Internet or computer cable into speaker wires, which required stripping insulation off tiny strips of copper, a delicate maneuver.

"I let them do it the hard way first, then show them the easy way," Connors said, pulling out a special wire-stripping tool. After one student mastered the technique, Connors let that student show others.

Connors' students become so proficient at the audio-video work, they've been used to set up systems in dozens of classrooms all across the district, saving the school system thousands of dollars in installation fees.

"It's a win-win for everyone," he said. "The kids get the experience they need, instead of just taking a test. Right now in the schools, we have 'death by testing.' But testing is not a true measure of learning."

"Application of the knowledge is a true test of learning and shows if they're ready for the world of work."

Applying it elsewhere

The reason why the district has not turned other schools into wall-to-wall career academies has to do with two factors, educators say.

While industry and business interests love the idea of more highly trained graduates, ready for the workforce, some parents still see vocational or technical school as lesser, something for kids who aren't college-bound.

Second, setting up a campuswide academy can be expensive, requiring the latest technology, computers, tools and other equipment, plus sprawling lab

and shop areas.

All of that may be changing in the next few years.

Pine Forest High School, right next to West Florida, is in the midst of a major redesign and will become a wall-to-wall career academy by fall 2016, without any more expense from the district, said Principal Frank Murphy.

New career tracks will include a teaching academy, which will virtually guarantee local teaching jobs to graduates who go on to college, as well as a health-related field that will be a "game changer," allowing all area hospitals and clinics to hire skilled medical workers.

Pine Forest, which has had a number of career and technical specialty areas for years, will follow a slightly different approach to applicants, he said.

Instead of a lottery to decide who can attend, Pine Forest will remain a traditional, zoned high school, although students from all over the county can apply to individual academies.

West Florida, too, is growing. The district is remodeling Woodham Middle School, about four miles to the east on Burgess Road, into the new West Florida campus, allowing West Florida more classroom and lab space.

Despite the pressure of deciding on a career at an early age, most students who apply to West Florida seem to like the hybrid career-and-academics method, pupils and educators say.

"For one thing, it helps you grow up," West Florida graduate Allen said. "Because you're coming straight out of high school, and a lot of kids are still in that party stage. This gets you in a career environment where you have to grow up, and it helps out a lot."



Rick Harper serves as director of the Studer Community Institute, a Pensacola-based organization that seeks citizen-powered solutions to challenges the community faces. He also directs the University of West Florida's Office of Economic Development and Engagement in Pensacola.

Education, skill-set are key to closing the gap in wealth

By Rick Harper
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Photo by Michael Spooneybarger

By now it's old news: "It's never been more important to get a good education than it is today."

But it bears repeating, because all of the indicators point in the same direction.

The share of national gross domestic income paid as wages and salaries peaked in 1978 at almost 52 percent and has declined steadily to 42 percent in 2013.

The strong positive relationship between education and income shows up in Florida as it does across the nation. The data below for our 67 counties show that an increase of 1 percent (say, from 25 to 26 percent) in the share of the population with university degrees is associated on average with an \$874 increase in average annual income per capita.

Further, the gap between those with more education and those with less has steadily increased over the years.

The Chronicle of Higher Education, which tracks this issue, finds that the gap in earnings between bachelor's degree holders and high school graduates is now at 65 percent over the course of a 40-year career. It is a 27 percent gap for an associate degree holder versus the high school degree holder.

The trend toward a greater income gap was seen in the national data when the September 2014 Federal Reserve Bulletin reported the results of the 2013 Survey of Consumer Finances. Between 2010 and 2013, the economy grew at an inflation-adjusted annual rate of 2.1 percent, while the unemployment rate fell from 9.9 to 7.5 percent. Overall average family income rose 4 percent over that period, but median family income fell by 5 percent, reflecting an increased income concentration.

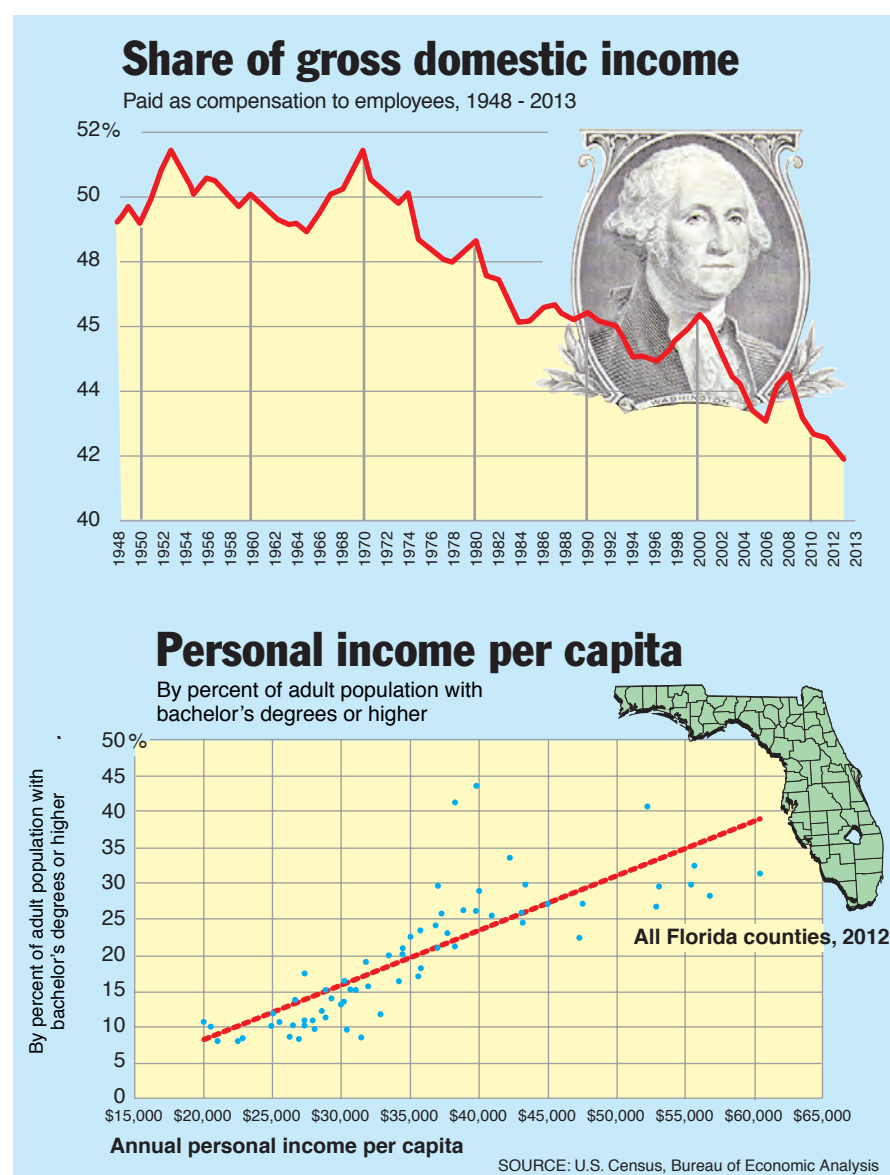
That fall in median income was not distributed evenly.

Families reporting a college degree registered a 1 percent increase in inflation-adjusted median income, from \$79,100 in before-tax median income in 2010 to \$80,000 in 2013.

Households reporting no high school diploma, high school diploma, and some college, had -9, -6, and -11 percent changes, respectively, in median family income over the 2010-2013 period. Those households reported \$22,300, \$37,000 and \$40,900 per year in median household income in 2013, respectively.

The divergence in income also is associated with a divergence in wealth.

Median family net worth measured \$17,200, \$52,500, \$46,900 and \$219,400



in 2013 for no high school diploma, high school diploma, some college, and college degree households, respectively.

The takeaway is that there is an income gap and there is an even more pronounced wealth gap. They are both growing, and the winners in the 21st century job market will be those with more education, job-related skills and competencies.

If the differences in earnings are so stark, why doesn't everybody get a bachelor's degree?

Transitioning lower- and middle-income children into well-educated higher earning adults is not an easy task. Families' ability to pay is falling at the same time that the cost of education is rising.

The federal government publishes consumer price indexes for education and for all items. Over the 1993 to 2014 period, the CPI for all items rose by 66 percent. The CPI for education rose by 207 percent over the same period. The CPI for medical care rose by 123 percent over the same period.

The Survey of Consumer Finance data noted that education debt is one of the few measures to have increased substantially between 2010 and 2013. A 12-year

look back shows that in 2001, about 22.4 percent of young households (i.e., headed by someone less than 40 years old) had education debt.

By 2013, that share had increased to 38.8 percent. Of those young families with education debt, the mean amount increased from \$16,900 in 2001 to \$29,800 in 2013.

Santa Rosa County ranked 18th among the 67 Florida counties in 2012 in terms of the share of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, while Escambia ranks 24th. Not surprisingly, we ranked 22nd (Escambia) and 23rd (Santa Rosa) in terms of per capita personal income.

The counties that ranked above us in income averaged 29.7 percent of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher, while those counties ranking below us in income averaged 14.6 percent of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Scholars find that the stagnation in U.S. income growth rates is due partly to a slowdown in educational attainment growth and partly to other factors, such as globalization and automation.

Which means that tomorrow's winners will clearly be those with the best skills.



Pensacola Metro Report

In August 2014, the Studer Community Institute produced the Pensacola Metro Report.

That 64-page publication used data from the University of West Florida's Office of Economic Development and Engagement to provide a snapshot of the two-county area's economic, educational and social well-being.

The report used that data as the underpinning for a series of stories that looked at the progress the Pensacola metro area has made in the last 10 years, and examined the challenges that continue to face our community.

A centerpiece of the Metro Report was the community dashboard, a series of objective benchmarks to provide an at-a-glance look at our community. The 16 benchmarks provide data points to help us track the community's growth, educational attainment, economic prospects, safety and civil life.

Online:

Visit StuderCommunityInstitute.com/dashboard for more detailed information and analysis, interactive charts and comparisons to peer metropolitan statistical areas and state averages.

In part 1:

Springtime in Florida means one thing — FCAT

But this year, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test — the test used to measure students' learning gains and to evaluate teacher's performance — is not the test it used to be.

The official state standardized test is now the Florida Standards Assessment. It replaces the previous versions of the state standardized test and will measure student performance in the Common Core-themed curriculum Florida schools have been using in recent years.

As Florida schools turn to the new test, schools are left with 16 years of data accumulated in the FCAT era, which was a centerpiece of Gov. Jeb Bush's push to reform public schools.

The Studer Community Institute launched this series of stories to look at how Pensacola metro area schools had fared under that reform effort, the bright spots that were unveiled and the work that remains ahead to help our students, our schools and our community improve.

Coming up in part 3:

Building a better reader

Experts agree that the key to building a good student is building a strong reader.

Increasingly, research suggests a pivotal time to influence a child's reading ability is between the ages of 0-3, which is often long before a child enters a classroom.

In the third installment of the Studer Community Institute's education report, we looked at the growing body of research that supports the importance of early learning, the importance of getting parents involved in the learning process at all ages, and at two programs working now in the Pensacola metro area to help bridge that gap.

On the cover

Junior Lynn Arthur celebrates after stripping a wire in Tom Connors' Cox Academy class at West Florida High School of Advanced Technology. The students are learning how to install a surround-sound system.

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About us

The Studer Community Institute is dedicated to helping people understand their community. We sponsor research and the development of benchmarks that allow cities and counties to evaluate the health of their local economy, government and quality of life. Our goal is to create a nonpartisan process that allows citizens to identify the critical issues a community needs to address to move forward.



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