

Mentors guide wavering kids Black adults reaching out to black students are making a difference.

By James Walsh

Staff Writer

Temondre Hudson looked at the Clarks with warm eyes and a small smile as he answered their questions in a clear voice. Yes, he said, he had homework for English to do over the weekend. Yes, he admitted, he had been late to school a couple days that week because he overslept.

“So what do you get from that?” asked Joann Clark.

“Put the alarm clock on,” Temondre said.

Sitting at a small round table in a small square room at Battle Creek Middle School in St. Paul, Temondre could have been visiting with kindly grandparents. The Clarks are his mentors through the St. Paul schools' Chosen to Achieve program, but maybe they are akin to kin after all.

They care, they're there and they consider Temondre one of their own.

Black adults entering the lives of black students is what Chosen to Achieve is all about. It features 120 adults mentoring 60 struggling or drifting black students attending three middle and junior high schools on St. Paul's East Side. What sets it apart is that it's a grass-roots effort, started with the desires of black adults at an East Side area church who wanted to connect with children during the often-stormy years of middle school. And it was the community that convinced the school district to make this happen, said Joann Clark, one of the lead mentors.

“We want to show them there are people out there who care about them,” she said.

It is not a complicated program. Two adult mentors team with each child to ensure that appointments aren't missed because of illness or work schedules. Mentors meet with their students just once every couple of weeks, always at the child's school. They question, they listen, sometimes they advise.

Mentors also meet as teams and with school district officials to discuss other needs and ideas that come out of the sessions, which allows officials to tap into other services if needed.

School district officials say it is paying dividends at Battle Creek Middle School, Hazel Park Middle School Academy and Cleveland Quality Middle School. Children who were missing class are now attending; homework that wasn't getting turned in is showing up on teachers' desks.

If it works here . . .

The results have impressed St. Paul Superintendent Patricia Harvey. “We wanted to start in a part of the city where we could get in and where we could have a model of support that could go district-wide,” she said. “If it works here it could work elsewhere.”

Anna Young, who directs the program for the St. Paul schools and recruits mentors, said officials plan to expand Chosen to Achieve to three more schools next fall: Washington Middle School, Humboldt Junior High and Highland Junior High.

One of the keys to the program's success, Young said, is that it started with the community. “It's not about being led by somebody. It had to come from the individual. It had to be authentic,” Young said. “We have pipefitters, plumbers, social workers. Basically, I just said to them: ‘You already know the need.’ And they said, ‘Yes, I do.’”

Students are referred to the program by school counselors. Mentors, who receive training and undergo criminal background checks, sit down with the students and go through the grades and progress reports from each of the child's teachers. Then, Young said, they just start asking questions.

But it is a powerful thing, she said, for black children to connect with black adults who care. Chosen to Achieve is open only to black adults and students.

“These kids are already struggling. They're already facing all kinds of barriers. They were in buildings with all-white staff,” she said, explaining the program's exclusivity. “They need people who can immediately understand them.”

Besides, she said, “It needs to come from the community anyway.”

‘Like human beings’

Getting involved was never a problem for Joann and Otis Clark. Their church, Progressive Baptist, launched the idea and Joann Clark is head of the church's education committee. In addition, she is the PTA president at Harding High School, where her youngest child goes to school, and has been head of the PTA at Battle Creek. All this, while also running a home-based day care business and raising three children.

“The kids love it because we treat them like human beings,” Joann Clark said of the mentoring program. Peter Christensen, principal at Battle Creek, said the community's desire to make a difference came through loud and clear last spring, when 40 people came to his office. “They said, ‘We're here to make a difference,’ ” he said. “I hope it's going to be something that works. What will make it work, I think, is people believing they make a difference in the lives of kids.”

Adayle Andrews, Temondre's English teacher, said it has made a tremendous difference. At the beginning of the year, she said, Temondre was disconnected, falling behind, “and that didn't seem to bother him very much.” Now, she said, he is more willing to ask for directions, to request make-up work if he missed an assignment and to turn in his homework on time.

Temondre says the difference is that the Clarks care. “They ask how I'm doing. And they help me focus on my work and not paying attention to other people. They get me to stay on task.”

They've given him Harry Potter books and a book about Frederick Douglass. Otis Clark even convinced Temondre to cut back on the television and get his homework done.

In return, teachers and mentors are discovering a seventh-grader who loves to draw, likes math and history, and can't wait for the start of track season so he can run the mile. Temondre has discovered something too: He likes the attention that comes with doing well.

“And I deserve it right now,” he said, smiling at the Clarks.

James Walsh is at jwalsh@startribune.com.

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