FKCC puts disadvantaged on college track

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Katlin Rahming is only in the sixth grade but she's already been to college.

“We go on field trips to learn about college and different workplaces where college is required,” the earnest-sounding 13-year-old said Friday. “I’m trying to decide between news reporter or business associate,” as a career, she added.

For kids like Katlin, a Horace O’Bryant Middle School student who is learning to organize and study in the same manner college students approach their studies, college isn’t just some word mouthed by students. Or even parents.

Katlin and other elementary and middle school students in the College Reach-Out Program (CROP) at Florida Keys Community College once were at-risk with failing grades. The outreach program is designed to show them an alternative future, one they might not be getting at home.

“A lot of these students have not realized or thought about college in their future,” said Carey Grooms-Davis, the CROP coordinator at the college. “A lot of them are from families where a college education is not always stressed.”

Many Keys students have only one parent, or two parents who work full time. In such households, college or help with homework aren't realities perhaps enjoyed by better-financed families.

Katlin, however, cites no personal struggle, beyond trying to improve her math scores.

“They sit us down and talk to us and let us know, ‘This is the best thing for you, even if you don't want to go.’ They tell us we should go there [to college] anyway and maybe you may find something you like.”

Katlin is one of hundreds of at-risk youngsters, from sixth to 12th grade, in the outreach program, which also pays two years' tuition at the community college, money the Legislature provides each year.

Unfortunately, those tax dollars have been reduced in recent years and could be reduced again next year, Davis said. Because of cuts in the state capital, the program is seeking local donations to make up the difference.

“It's the unsung hero at the college,” Davis said of the program. “We've helped thousands of struggling students over the years.”

Whetting appetites

The number of students the program helps depends on the size of the annual state Department of Education grant that pays for it. A Shel Perloff Memorial CROP Fund, to which private citizens and businesses can donate, holds $10,138 that can be used in the program, college spokeswoman Amber Ernst-Leonard said.
"The Perloff Fund in the former coordinator's name also is available for use in the program," she said.

One year, the state provided $100,000, which brought 202 students through the program; That dropped to $74,000 in 2008-2009, which provided for fewer than 170 students, Davis said. This year, she's shepherding 168 with $68,000 and the aid of three helpers in the schools: Amy Wardlow, a student counselor at Horace O'Bryant; Mary Thomas, a teacher at Key West High School, and Marla Russell, an assistant principal at Sugarloaf School, which is a K-8 school.

The money goes to Davis' salary as coordinator, $1,200 each in supplemental pay to teachers or counselors who act as Davis' liaisons at each of the three public schools, as well as tutoring, a summer school program, school supplies for the students, office supplies for Davis' office, and even snacks for the kids.

The program also includes math and reading tutorials, academic motivational activities and individual and group counseling sessions at the college.

Parents aren't off the hook on this, either.

"If there's going to be a field trip or college day, I send home permission slips asking them to be monitors or chaperones on those trips," Davis said. "I also get parents involved with their kids if there's an issue with their school work."

These are families where both parents have to work to make ends meet and may not have time to help their children with homework and other school-related issues.

"We take kids who are struggling with their homework, with grade point averages below 2.0," Davis said. "These are not bad kids; they are good kids with potential but not getting family support because both parents are working. Mom doesn't have time to check their homework."

Davis meets with students at three schools at least once a week: Horace O'Bryant Middle School, Sugarloaf School and Key West High School to see how their studies are advancing. Or not advancing.

"I check their grades and see if they're having any issues and gauge how they're progressing," Davis said. "I can provide them with tutors, but I'd prefer to let them use tutors already assigned to their school in after-school programs."

Davis' goal is to have them earn 2.5 GPAs or higher by the time they leave college. It's not just about improving grades to get kids into college, she said. It's about introducing them to the community college so they can envision higher education.

"It's to whet their appetites," Davis said. "I ask them what they want to be. If they say a nurse, or an artist or marine biologist, I show them the college and the classrooms. One student I took to the college spent half a day with the nursing department and saw how they learn. I take them to take part in an art class, you name it."

A high school hand-up

Several students recruited for the program while in elementary school now are studying at the college or are about to graduate.

Zynzanna Piceno, 19, started in the program in the sixth grade and stuck with it, she said, with Davis' help when she hit high school. Shel Perloff, the coordinator she'd been with since fourth grade, died, leaving her saddened and rudderless for a time.

"When I hit 11th grade, I almost dropped out; it was very bad," she said. "I wasn't going to classes, my grades started dropping, but I got my GED, I was reinstated in high school and got my diploma."

Davis, who took over after Perloff passed away in August 2007, put Piceno back on the railroad tracks and onward, the young lady said.

"If I needed help with homework, she gave me her cell phone and I could call her any time of day. She's been a great help in my life," she said.

After obtaining her high school degree, she transferred to the college on Stock Island and is in the midst of her associate's degree courses. Davis and college staff helped her sign up for classes and other details to get her enrolled.

"I enrolled almost late and [Davis] gave me a tour of the college, showed me where my classes were and took me to the financial aid office. Within a week everything was perfect, it worked."
When it's time to move to a four-year school, Piceno said, she's going to pursue a career in the hospitality industry.

"I'm not sure where I'll apply, yet, but I'm going to."

Tiffani Arnold is 22 and said she's grateful for the help she received in the program. The energetic young lady joined after seeing her aunt excel in the format.

"I've been in it since middle school, the seventh grade," Arnold said. "Something about it was helping my aunt, so I asked her about it and she got me into the program."

Arnold also worked for the program, going to Sugarloaf School to tell other youngsters about college life. She's in the nursing program at the college while she earns her associate's degree.

"I'm going to graduate with an AA in May," she said. "Honestly, I wouldn't have been able to go to college but with the financial aid the program provides. They helped me so much; Cary [Davis] dropped whatever she was doing whenever I needed help."

Brian Gaitan said he joined the program in 2003 when he was in ninth grade. He now studies for his associate's degree at the college.

"It definitely reaches the students and connects with them very well," Gaitan said of the outreach program. "Davis has helped me not only with assignments but in my private life, like a counselor."

Gaitan will graduate in May and hopes to start at an art college next year.

"I am happy to be on track," he said.

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