

The Kansas City Star

It's worth trying to save every student

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The Kansas City Star

Sun, Aug. 23, 2009

Far too many students enter college each year unprepared because of deficiencies in elementary and secondary school education.

It is a national epidemic and a disgrace, which a 2005 National Education Summit on Higher Education report said costs colleges and businesses \$16 billion a year. That's because none of the needed remedial college courses counts toward graduation.

"Only 10 percent of remedial students ever complete a degree," said Eurmon Hervey, executive vice president of Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, Fla.

About 30 percent of college freshmen require some remedial courses. In some colleges and universities, the number is as high as 95 percent.

Bernard Franklin, president of Metropolitan Community College—Penn Valley, has spoken about this growing concern. High school students graduate unprepared for higher education at a time when the country needs more people with college degrees.

But Daryao S. Khatri, a physics professor, this month told the National Association of Black Journalists convention in Tampa, Fla., that he thinks he has a solution.

"I saw a gold mine of students who could achieve at the highest level possible," Khatri said. For the last four years he has worked with the "most academically challenged" students from a Washington, D.C., high school to prepare them for college, and many have avoided remedial courses. He did it through a summer Gateway Algebra Program.

"We need to let people know it is doable," he said. Khatri, who teaches at the University of the District of Columbia, found that few students could pass college science courses.

Gwen Stephenson, president of Hillsborough Community College in Tampa, said: "The students come and want to learn. We have to help our students."

To address the problem, Khatri started an intensive math course for new high school graduates. In 2006 it was six weeks long. In 2007 it expanded to eight weeks.

But he had to fight a few myths. First, people thought he would suffer great harm or damage to his car for going into an inner-city school. He has been openly welcomed.

"People say parents of these kids don't care," Khatri said. "It is not true. People said you can't teach these kids. They don't want to learn.

"But you can teach them."

The four-hour-a-day program pushes students to achieve by holding them to high expectations. Each student gets a stipend of \$1,200 to offset lost wages from forgoing full-time summer jobs.

No calculators are allowed. Cell phones and iPods also are banned. Napping or eating in class is not permitted. Students can go to the bathroom only on assigned breaks. The discipline adds to the program's success. But so does the faith the instructors have in the students.

Student achievement is phenomenal. This year 54 percent of the students tested out of remedial math courses; 44 percent tested out of the remedial reading and English courses. That saved the students a year in remedial work.

The program has enjoyed similar success each year. Students gain new confidence in their academic ability.

"It's not the students who have failed," said Khatri. "It's not the parents who have failed. It is the system that has failed."

He described schools in which the students rule and educators are fearful. That culture has to change.

"It is shocking to hear the teachers do not want to teach," Khatri said. "But somehow the system has lost control of these kids. What is needed are common sense strategies. These are good kids."

The program needs to be replicated. Students, universities and community colleges nationwide need it — regardless of the cost.

Khatri said at the end of one class a parent said he had saved her son, who's blossoming now in college. More of our kids need that advantage.

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