

HEROES NIGHT

Jalen Rose Leadership Academy High School Priority

Helping Youth from Marginalized Backgrounds Achieve College Success

One thing that strikes a first-time visitor to Jalen Rose Leadership Academy is that there are no students here. Everyone in this northwest Detroit charter school for 420 youths, grades 9-12, refers to youth as scholars. The emphasis on scholarly attainment is ubiquitous in this College Preparatory environment, where colorful university pennants line the main hallway and the school mantra is, “Enter a Learner, Exit a Leader.” More than promising a fine education, the ultimate goal for this Academy - where many youth are the first in their families to attend college – is not just college admission, but college success.

“We want to provide the best opportunities for a high school education to support our scholars all the way to and through college,” Principal Wendie Lewis told Michigan’s Children. “We want our scholars to embody the growth mindset. You may come in with deficits but you are learner and you will constantly grow. We’ll put you in situations to grow.”

“One hundred percent of our scholars are African-American, and 90 percent or so are low income,” she added. “It’s extremely important for our scholars who live in the city of Detroit to see college as an opportunity, to know that they can go to college and be successful.” Emphasis on confidence-building supports and debunking the “Imposter Syndrome” that plagues marginalized groups are top-of-mind. “College obviously is important because it’s life changing. The opportunities presented when you have a college degree are expansive.”

The Academy boasts a 93-percent graduation rate, significantly higher than the state average of just over 80 percent, according to the Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Its website boasts a fifth-place ranking among open-enrollment Detroit high schools for college persistence. “I’ll say this, among charters in the city of Detroit, there are a few that have had staying power and we are among those. We’ve been in existence since 2011. For us to have had this longevity, we’ve done something well,” Lewis said.

For his work to change the trajectories for youth and families in Detroit, co-founder Jalen Rose is being honored by Michigan’s Children at its [Heroes Night](#) event on November 11th in Detroit. Rose, an ESPN analyst who previously played professionally for the NBA and was a member of the famed “Fab Five” on the University of Michigan basketball team in the 1990s, remains active in Academy operations as the



A wall mural at Jalen Rose Leadership Academy

president of its school board. Its membership includes a who's who of corporate and nonprofit CEO's and COO's and other civic leaders. (Former Mayor Dave Bing among them.) Rose's star power is not surprisingly at play in fundraising (last year approximately \$800,000 was raised) to expand curriculum and facility offerings, as well as to help some of its families with college costs. An open-enrollment academy, it draws from 40 separate middle schools and is part of a three-school network in Detroit and Highland Park under The Promise Schools, a nonprofit educational management company. Its authorizer is Central Michigan University.

Its small size and feel is considered an asset even while the Academy is working hard to become one of the city's elite schools and expand beyond its walls. It's located in a small former elementary school; two of its 25 teachers rotate to available classrooms every class hour. "You definitely feel it's very close knit, very safe. It's easy to get to know the scholars and their families," Lewis added. "Also, our staff is made up of people who are eager to share and support one another, to learn from one another, and develop professionally."



Principal Wendie Lewis



Scholar Stephan Davis, 17

Scholar Stephan Davis, 17, a senior considering colleges for a criminal justice major, said he sensed a good environment immediately upon visiting as a middle schooler and then again as an incoming freshmen. He recalled how he and his mother exchanged knowing looks on one visit. "She looked and me, and I looked at her, and we both gave thumbs up," he said. "I felt like I belonged here. Everyone was getting along."

As a charter school, its state school aid contribution is several thousand dollars less per student than public schools in Detroit. Despite these financial constraints, Lewis said charter schools like the Academy are eager to learn best educational practices to reinforce program offerings and enhance the expertise of staff, a few of whom are still in the process of earning their state certification while on the job. The school requires that staff attend 90 minutes of professional development each week, usually on Friday afternoons when the Academy

closes at 1p.m. Because many of their students entered “below grade level,” staff training focuses on grade level development and Advance Placement principles established by the College Board. Each student is required to take at least one advance placement course.

Higher-level thinking skills are also stressed to ensure that Academy scholars can compete when they get to college. Lewis said they’re mindful of the balance between challenging their youth without frustrating them. The Academy also employs an Alumni Success Coordinator to keep tabs on alumni when they get to college, checking in on them during mid-terms, finals, and before FAFSA (federal student aid) reports are due. She’s also looking in on their social well-being. And if someone drops out of college, the coordinator works with them to either enroll in a college that offers a better fit, or in another post-secondary program.

Other strong features at Jalen Rose Leadership Academy are: its commitment to restorative justice practices drawn from a strict Scholar Code of Conduct including developing self-regulation skills; a rigorous credit recovery program; and an enrichment program with built-in rewards designed to appeal to students’ personal interests.

Students earn extra credits in enrichment activities that they can exchange for items from the “school store” – shirts, caps and the like - and collect demerits when they misbehave. Demerits can be worked off during so-called “warrior” sessions involving athletic activities like yoga or basketball games, besides traditional study halls. There are designated adult “leadership coaches” to spend time or mentor the students and encourage positive actions. They also hold formal “restorative conversations” when someone – another scholar or teacher – has been harmed.

Last year, there was a “huge restorative conversation” following an event when some students brought marijuana-laced edibles to school. Depending on a student’s involvement, parents were including in those conversations. In severe cases, a required 12 weeks of drug counseling was meted out at a nearby community center with trained drug counselors. “The outcome was we never had another issue of that magnitude involving drugs again,” Lewis said.

The Academy doesn’t promote students from one year to the next if they are deficient in their earned credits. They can recover credits by attending night school during the week or Saturday School. “So when they get to 12th grade, they are on track to graduate,” she said.

Besides cashing in on earned “merits” at the school store, the Academy offers scholarships to those who continue in a long-term enrichment program. Davis has been part of a group called FATE that recently organized a community festival at a local church with a variety of activities, including a celebrity basketball game and food trucks. “We get rewarded. When I graduate, I’ll get a \$5,000 scholarship for all the years I’ve been part of FATE,” he said.

The Academy’s Dean of Scholars manages the school’s enrichment and summer learning programs. “Our enrichment opportunities provide our scholars outside outlets for them to engage with adults outside this building who are in the business sector, private sector organizations and professions. We want our scholars to advocate for themselves, to communicate well. They won’t have that opportunity unless we structure it into our program,” Lewis said.