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Metro Achievement Program

Metro helps Chicago's disadvantaged youngsters to become better students and better people through after-school and summertime programs that integrate academics with virtues.

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On a warm Saturday morning on the near west side of Downtown Chicago, a small group of seventh and eighth-graders are taking a class in a brightly decorated room on the first

floor of a five story building. Upstairs, another group of girls are peering intently at a computer screen: they are looking through the Internet for information for an after-school science project at Chicago's famed Shedd Aquarium. Yet a third group, high school students, are sitting in a small corner classroom nearby, listening to a volunteer from a Chicago-area corporation talk to them about setting goals for themselves: in school, eventually in the workplace, but also today, in their homes and family life.

These girls are not attending an expensive preparatory school nor are they from the better neighborhoods of Chicago. Moreover, they are mostly Hispanic and African-American and live in or near Chicago's inner city. We are in Metro Achievement Center for Girls, one of the educational centers reared by

Midtown Educational Foundation (MEF).

Metro was launched in 1985 to offer a supplementary educational program "to promote the personal and educational development of Chicago inner city girls" from fourth through twelfth grades. Much of its work was built on the outstanding success of a program for boys sponsored by MEF, founded twenty years before.

To be accepted into the program, these children must live in the city of Chicago, be academically average, come from an economically disadvantaged family, and have at least one parent or guardian who agrees to attend sessions for parents.

The Metro Achievement Center occupies 17,000 square feet of renovated classrooms, including a computer lab, and an arts and recreation center. Located in

Downtown Chicago, it is easily accessible to those it seeks to serve.

Developing the Whole Person

No doubt the building is attractive, but what truly matters at Metro is the philosophy of education that is behind everything they do there. Esperanza Padilla is fourteen years old and started going to Metro when she was ten. Despite living in a troublesome neighborhood, she says "The day I walked in the door, my attitude started to change. I needed to have somebody keeping after me or I would never have learned things like persistence. Metro did that for me." Last year, Padilla won the Spirit of Metro award at the Center's annual awards ceremony, given to the girl who best exemplifies the ideals of the program.

The ideas that inspire and are present in all the activities are based on the doctrine of the Catholic

Church and on the teachings of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, Founder of Opus Dei, a Personal Prelature of the Catholic Church, that helps ordinary people live their faith in everyday life, and to work with a sense of responsibility, for love of God and of others. As a proof of this catholic -- which means universal -- spirit, Metro is open to people of all races and religious beliefs.

"We help inner city girls succeed academically, but at Metro we go beyond academics," comments Sharon Hefferan, Executive Director of Metro Achievement Center. "Our character education program, with its focus on instilling virtue, gives depth to the personal development of each girl. Inner city kids often fail in college and beyond not simply because of poor grades, but also because they lack the personal discipline and virtues needed to excel. At Metro, we help the girls

succeed by motivating them to excel as people."

That help is delivered in character development classes, which are a hallmark of Metro programs overall. Complementing the students' theoretical understanding of responsibility and good character is the interaction each of them enjoys with a personal "coach," one of some 200 Metro adult volunteers. This group includes young professionals, many of them recruited from major corporations around the Chicago area, as well as students from local colleges. These volunteers work not only as tutors, but more importantly as advisors and mentors.

The sheer number of volunteers attracted to the Metro programs results in a volunteer-to-staff ratio of approximately 42 to 1, a remarkably high proportion, of which the Center is understandably proud.

The Programs

The main programs are:

The One-on-One Program (fourth to sixth grade), which engages each child in weekly sessions with a volunteer tutor-mentor who encourages good attitudes towards learning, builds good study habits and serves as a positive role model.

The Metro Achievement Program (seventh and eighth grades) which offers Math, Science, and English courses aimed at preparing the middle school student for a college preparatory high school and ultimately college. This program continues to stress the importance of acquiring the habits and attitudes of people of good character.

The College Orientation Program (ninth to twelfth grade) offers guided study time with tutors, classes to build Math and English skills,

enrichment activities such as cultural field trips, and visits to college campuses. Students are encouraged to volunteer for various service projects including working at soup kitchens and nursing homes, and tutoring younger students.

Metro also has a program for the parents of these students, which offers talks on topics such as "Teaching Teens Virtues." Sharon Hefferan explains: "At every parents' session, we try to communicate a fundamental idea: the parents have a primary role in the education of their children. We and other organizations can assist them, but we cannot take over their role. What we can do is help them do a better job at carrying out their mission."

"It is extremely important that fathers and mothers understand this idea and are reminded of it frequently. Parents have to discover,

and we can help them discover, ways to educate their children, to encourage reading, studying and good behavior at home. In this way, we bring the parents into the character education programs that we offer them and their children at Metro."

The girls at Metro have fun, just like any other young person. The Fine Arts Program, a mixture of dance, music, theater, plastic arts and other activities, gives them an opportunity to express themselves through ways they had never experienced before. During one of these programs, the girls' paintings were on exposition in one of the galleries at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ruth Schilling, a volunteer, gave singing lessons: "Though the girls might not admit it, they love to perform. At my first class, all they did was giggle. But when they finally

began to sing I saw and heard such effort and joy. The satisfaction I get from teaching is irreplaceable."

The Big Picture

Metro's success with school-age girls is no secret in the larger Chicago educational and business community. Area corporations with a sense of civic responsibility and looking for reliable workforce signed on right away. "Here at IBM, we've been watching and supporting Metro's fine work for nearly ten years now. Metro continues to do a fine job, teaching critical academic and workplace skills. Moreover, it's even more impressive that Metro forms young women who possess a real spirit of service and character," comments Diane Doers, Central Region Community Relations Manager for IBM.

Patti Patino -- a college junior and a scholarship student at DePaul

University of Chicago -- just finished a technology internship at the accounting firm Deloitte & Touche. As is the case with most students who pass through Metro, Patti continues to stay in touch with the Center and its programs, giving her time and what she has received there to younger girls.

"I started at Metro in seventh grade, and my only thought was how to get through high school at the most. My parents didn't go to college, we didn't have the money for college, and frankly I was a little afraid of the idea. I wound up on a high school scholarship at the Willow Academy because of my experience at Metro."

Metro supplemented Patti's high school program with tutoring, including sessions on how to take notes in class. "I thought note-taking meant transcribing, taking down every word the teacher said. But my

Metro tutors explained what it really meant and that was a huge help. Metro was always a place I went to for help -- to learn what college would be like, to actually visit different colleges, and to just have my tutors telling me, "You can do it."

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