



College Try in Eighth Grade

UConn-Stamford to kick off program for 125 students

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STAMFORD - Next summer, 125 city students will undergo a one-month immersion in the coursework, format and intellectual challenges of college. Then they'll go on to eighth grade.

Twenty-five students from each of Stamford's five middle schools will participate in the University Pals program, which is geared for children who would be the first in their families to attend college, said Michael Ego, associate vice provost at the University of Connecticut's Stamford campus. Students will take eight college-level classes tailored for the four-week schedule. Four classes will cover core topics, such as math and science, and four will be electives. Classes will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. five days a week in July and August at UConn-Stamford, with students working at internships on Fridays.

School officials welcomed the program. "We have been very, very excited about this opportunity for young people to be engaged in a college-connected program at the middle (school) level," said Rodney Bass, principal of Turn of River Middle School.

This would be the newest of several programs in the district to get students focused on college so they can better prepare for it. The district already prepares children for college life as early as sixth grade through the Advancement by Individual Achievement program, used by many districts nationwide, said Winifred Hamilton, Stamford's assistant superintendent for secondary education. Children visit colleges in sixth grade and get other help as they prepare for higher education. Next year, the high schools will offer courses approved by UConn that carry three college credits, she said.

Hamilton said that administrators took eighth-graders on trips to colleges when she was principal of Dolan Middle School. "Now, we realize that eighth grade is almost too late," she said.

Starting the college acclimation process early seems to be the trend because colleges and the workplace are growing more competitive, Bass said. Students who scope out college earlier can get a head start on taking classes that will put them ahead in pursuing a major, Hamilton said. Some parents talk to their children about college as

soon as they start school, while others may not seriously consider it until much later, said former school board member Robert King, vice president of programs for the 100 Black Men of Stamford, a service organization that does mentoring in schools.

"If no one intercedes with them . . . they'll miss out on some of the opportunities that will help prepare themselves," he said.

Ego, who is spearheading the initiative, said he launched it to bolster the regional economy and increase the supply of educated workers for the higher-paying jobs necessary for living in this expensive area. He also wanted to help less fortunate children succeed. Students are eligible if they would be the first in their immediate families to attend college, Ego said.

He held an open house for parents and students last week to tell them about the program and has been raising money in the community to support it. The program is entirely privately funded, he said. This week, he was finishing the application form, which will go out to schools in January.

No grades will be given in the University Pals program, but the students will have homework and they'll work in small groups to complete final projects, Ego said. There will be a commencement, an alumni association and a course for parents to familiarize them with the college application process.