

Armstrong Priorities Academy Overview

St. John's rector and pastors in Church Hill have been meeting to determine how the Diocese and area churches can combine efforts to benefit those living in poverty in Church Hill. The following is their proposal:

The Purpose: Armstrong Priorities Freshman Academy will identify entering ninth grade students at Armstrong High School below grade level and will provide instruction in math and English to bring them up to grade level by the tenth grade.

The Need: Armstrong was one of the first African-American public high schools established after the Civil War. Because of demographic movements and the concentration of public housing in Church Hill, at least 75% of Armstrong's 900 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Armstrong has the highest concentration of low-income students in the Richmond area. In 2013, the last year for which statistics are available, Armstrong's on-time graduation rate was 74%. Armstrong's Principal, Ms. April Hawkins, has identified a need for remediation in math and English. Recently, about two-thirds of 300 entering freshmen have been at least 2 years behind in these subjects. This significant issue challenges the school system, a high percentage of whose students come from poor backgrounds. When students enter ninth grade two or more years behind in reading and mathematics and are taught the standard curriculum in classes of normal size, many fall further behind during that year. The highest drop-out rates occur between ninth and tenth grades. The draw of the street is powerful. Truancy and acting-out in class multiply as these students become upperclassmen unable to follow the coursework. The result is distress, disruption, a failure to graduate and to find direction after high school.

Effective preparation for tenth grade math and English will increase the chances for a successful high school career and will raise the graduation rate, the number of college admissions, and instances of successful entry into the workforce by Armstrong graduates.

Description of the Work: The pastors want the faith community to lead the creation and support of the Armstrong Priorities Freshman Academy. The first group will consist of 60 students, placed in classes of 20 who will receive English and math instruction every day. One math teacher and one English teacher, specially chosen and supported for this task, will engage these students. A coordinator will oversee the program, measuring achievement and coordinating social service referrals and volunteers. Churches will provide funds, after-school activities, material support, mentoring/tutoring, transportation, and enrichment classes. Churches will co-sponsor activities with parents and help them become involved and committed. The goal of the program is to bring the Academy students up to grade level by tenth grade. The strategies will provide intensive math and English instruction, taught in smaller classes, with tutoring available; provide wrap-around social services as needed; provide nurture and support through membership in a consistent student cohort led by consistently present adults; and provide support by volunteer partners and mentors, including group formation in summer school and retreats. Preparation for the freshman year will begin with a two-week preparatory academy in August.

The Budget: The budget ranges from \$64,754, to \$226,550 for the first group, depending on support available from the public school budget and in-kind gifts. We ask for your prayers and for gifts--checks can be made to--St. John's Church, Memo: Armstrong Priorities Fund.

Please keep our neighborhood students in your prayers.