

At Times2 Academy, success rate is all about 'attention'.

11:27 AM EDT on Monday, March 23, 2009
By Linda Borg, Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- Aaron Mendez is a 2008 graduate of Times2 Academy and he can tell you why every one of his classmates graduated from his charter school.

"As a class, we decided to help each other," said Mendez, a freshman at Providence College. "If someone was failing, we'd put them on the spot. We'd say, 'You need to improve, man.' We'd stay after school and help them out. We're like family."

Mendez, a first-generation American whose family is from Guatemala, has attended Times2 since sixth grade, and he says that as soon as he got there, he noticed that there was a very special relationship between teachers and students.

Where Mendez comes from, college is a dream, not a given. The same can be said for most of his classmates, whose families have struggled to make a new home in an unfamiliar land.

Asked to name the one thing that distinguishes Times2 from other public schools, Mendez says, "Attention."

Yesterday, Governor Carcieri chose Times2, a K-12 charter school near Smith Hill, to announce the state's latest graduation rate data, which shows that the graduation rate in urban high schools has increased by 5 percentage points to 61 percent.

Two urban charter schools, Times2 and Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy on Broadway, have the highest graduation rates in the state -- 100 percent -- better than Classical High School, the city's most competitive secondary school, and Barrington High School. Block Island, with only 15 seniors, also graduated all of its seniors last year.

Charter schools are public schools because they receive public dollars but they typically have more freedom to experiment with the curriculum and schedule. Both Times2 and Textron, however, are district charter schools whose teachers belong to a union.

So what sets these two charter schools apart from their urban peers? Both schools are small, which encourages closer relationships between students and teachers. Last year, Times2 had only 30 graduates while Textron had 46. Compare those schools to a typical Providence high school, where it isn't uncommon to have 300 students per grade.

"Students believe that their teachers have their best interests at heart," said David Estes, the head of the middle and high schools at Times{+2}. "We keep class sizes small and all students take the same courses."

At Times{+2}, every child is on the college track and the course sequence is rigorous. Students take Algebra 1 in eighth grade. In high school, they move from geometry to advanced college math or AP Calculus if they are interested. There is no social promotion.

One of the biggest advantages is that Times{+2} offers continuity: students who arrive in elementary school are prepared for the course work in middle school and so forth. And there is a relentless focus on college, starting in the earlier grades.

"We devote a lot of resources to non-academic needs," said Lawrence E. DeSalvatore Jr., Textron's head of school. "We have a guidance counselor and two deans who address the issues that can derail a student. We look at the whole child."

Textron, which is a high school only, recognizes that many students are performing well below grade level. To meet that need, the school provides double periods of math and English in ninth grade and places students who are really far behind in classes with only 10 to 12 students.

A big challenge for many urban teenagers is the need to balance school with work. At Textron, juniors are expected to find after-school jobs, and seniors must participate in internships that culminate in a 90-minute exhibition before family and faculty members.

Peter McWalters, the commissioner of elementary and secondary education, always points out that Rhode Island is the second most urban state in the nation, after New Jersey. Statewide graduation rates won't improve, he says, until the urban districts get more students to walk the stage.