

Black students receive special attention getting into private schools

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John Heller, Post-Gazette

Isreal Williams, 10, who is a fourth-grader at St. Edmund's Academy, and his mother, Angela Williams, stand outside their home on the North Side. Ms. Williams believes the Fund for the Advancement of Minorities through Education, which helped her navigate the admission and financial aid process to enroll him in the private school, "will put my son in a place where public schools would not have allowed him to go."

**By Ervin Dyer
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

Thirty years ago, Booker T. Williams removed his daughter, Angela, from an urban public school and enrolled her in the private, then all-girls Winchester Thurston School.

To get her there, the family waded through a tangle of admissions, tests, recommendations and the guilt of how to keep their young black daughter, now entering a predominantly white environment, culturally healthy. They did it all alone.

Fast forward a generation.

A few months ago, Angela Williams enrolled her own academically gifted son, Isreal, 10, in the fourth grade at the private St. Edmund's Academy.

This time, when Ms. Williams, a single mother, waded through the thicket of admissions and financial aid, she was anything but alone.

Firmly in her corner was the Fund for the Advancement of Minorities through Education, or FAME, a 14-year-old effort that reaches out and guides students of color into more rigorous, though pricey, independent schools.

Groups such as FAME are not new. But as independent schools continue to pursue minority enrollment and retention, FAME and even the schools themselves are becoming more assertive in recruiting African-American families into the system.

It's not only private, independent schools. The nation's Catholic schools have also stepped up recruitment.

■ **Chart:** [Origins of FAME](#)

African-American families pull their children out of big-city public schools for the same reasons that white families do:

They believe private education offers more competitive curriculums, smaller classes and better chances at high achievement.

Ms. Williams, of the North Side, calls herself a "homeowner in the 'hood." She is looking to prepare her son for an Ivy League college.

"This program," she said, "will put my son in a place where public schools would not have allowed him to go."

For the schools, their recruitment is driven by the desire to have diversity on campus, said Dr. Veronica Morgan-Lee, executive director of Crossroads Foundation, a Catholic charity charged with getting disadvantaged youth into Catholic schools.

For urban parents, she said, it gives them an option to combat the failure rates in public schools.

Because suburban schools are typically high-performing, it's tougher to recruit from them, but urban communities are fertile ground, Dr. Morgan-Lee said.

"To move from a public system with no tuition to a school that's run by tuition dollars is a tough transition," she said. One of the ways private schools attract students from the inner city is with scholarships.

"I would not be able to afford my house note and Isreal's tuition, too," said Ms. Williams, a nonprofit consultant and a full-time graduate student at Chatham College. Isreal's education costs \$14,000 a year; she pays \$500.

According to the National Association of Independent Schools, a consortium of 13,000 private academies. African-Americans make up roughly 5.5 percent of the student population in its member schools.

While NAIS does not break down financial aid statistics by specific racial/ethnic groups, 37.7 percent of the students who received need-based financial aid last school year were students of color. More than \$407 million in financial aid was awarded to those students.

These top-tier schools acknowledge that financial aid is the largest need for prospective

students' parents. Often modest-income parents close the door on independent education thinking they could never afford the tuition.

In Pittsburgh, some independent upper schools cost \$23,000 a year or more. It's a price tag that even middle-income parents struggle to wrap themselves around.

As tuitions continue to rise, packaging scholarships and grants enables families to afford the schools, said Constance Horton, executive director of FAME.

The higher tuitions mean the schools must struggle to keep their campuses from being polarized by the very wealthy or the very needy.

As a result, aid, which, in the past, was steered toward lower income students, is now being shifted toward middle-income African-American families.

It could be worth it.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 99.3 percent of students who attended NAIS schools in 2000 graduated, compared with 88 percent of public school students. In Catholic schools, 97 percent of graduates go on to college.

Students from severely impoverished communities who attended private schools beginning in the eighth grade were three times more likely to get bachelor's or higher degrees by their mid-20s than public school students from the same socioeconomic backgrounds.

Ms. Williams wanted her son to leave what she called a "disruptive" charter school, and a visit to the FAME fair last year gave her more information on St. Edmund's, one of the independent schools under FAME's umbrella. She arranged a campus visit and, all along the way, a wave of phone calls and e-mail from FAME kept her abreast of deadlines and gave her advice on financial aid.

Today, there are 50 scholars in the FAME family and they get more support services.

To build unity, FAME provides tutoring, and sponsors picnics and barbecues to bring students together and foster emotional support in a system that can seem alienating.

With their uniforms and rigor, these elite schools can seem foreign to big city minorities, who often have to take two buses to get to their campuses. They are working to halt the perception that their campuses are lonely places for minorities.

Recruitment today is more intensive, said Ken Williams, the first full-time diversity director at Sewickley Academy. Mr. Williams joined the school five years ago.

In that time, Mr. Williams has noticed that more independent schools are using diversity gurus to help design multicultural curriculum and work closer with financial aid and admissions offices to get students to campus.

They are enlisting minority alumni to give "testimony," believing that their real-life survival tales can encourage other black students to give the schools a chance.

In addition to talking directly with students and parents at admissions fairs, diversity directors at independent schools are tugging at the robes of black clergy. By speaking to

churches and inviting the pastors to campus programming, they are tapping one of the most time-tested traditions of reaching out to the masses of black folks.

"I knew by visiting local churches," Mr. Williams said, "that I wasn't just talking to a pastor, I was talking to an entire congregation."

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