

Provide opportunity for all Minneapolis students

Written by Scott Gray, MUL President/CEO
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For more than 40 years, the Minneapolis Urban League (MUL) has operated the Urban League Academy (ULA), an alternative high school serving students from Minneapolis. Each year, we serve about 100 students and help them finish needed credits or get re-acclimated to school when most have been unsuccessful elsewhere. Another 200 due to personal and academic challenges give up and simply quit or succumb to the lure of the streets. Throughout the years, without the resources and many times the support needed, we have been able to press forward and prepare our students with important foundational and life skills that help them to live meaningful lives and become productive citizens in our community.

Our students at the academy come to us with numerous odds against them. They are more likely to go to prison, have gang influences, experience family abuse, and pretty much all live in poverty. They are often the very disconnected, have blurry aspirations, and have lost confidence in their academic abilities. Our typical ULA student is 18 years old, African American, severely low income, behind his/her peers on credits to graduate, behind his/her peers in proficiency levels on math and reading, on his/her 4th secondary school transition, and down on school, yet still hopeful about their life. They have grown up in challenging situations, have had their spirit tested, and been through systems that have not catered to their individual needs. Our students are referred or placed in our program, often as a "last resort." The story of our school often parallels the story of the Urban League movement nationwide. Our students are often "cast down" but they are not cast out. Through the years, we have continued to have faith and high hopes for these young people, often when few others did.

By the time a student comes to ULA, they have struggled in several high schools and have far too few credits to even think about graduating on time. We recognize with the World's Best Workforce legislation that there is more pressure to graduate students on time. I want to believe that the added pressure and accountability will help our younger students as they move through their educational experience. I am extremely concerned about the students I see each day in front of me who are ages 16, 17, 18 and ill prepared to enter their next phase of life.

The funding allotted for alternative schools is hardly sufficient to provide quality resources for the students from the most challenged circumstances, with the most complex needs. It is

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evident by the level of investment that contract alternative schools and the students that attend them have been left to fend for themselves, or simply discounted.

We are in the age of accountability. Three months ago, the MUL worked with other contract alternatives to develop an accountability metric tool. This week the Minneapolis Board of Education will discuss the issues and opportunities surrounding contract alternatives as a community partner.

With the odds stacked against our students, schools like the ULA focus on providing students with the educational training they need to earn graduation credits but we also spend a lot of time on career exploration and career planning. We provide our students with job opportunities while in high school, introduce them to new career opportunities, the employability soft skills that employers require, competencies that they will need to succeed in work and life. Our students are often "super seniors" and have already been counted out by traditional systems. We are working to expose them to a new way of viewing themselves, by providing new insights and greater possibilities for their lives in this 21st century knowledge economy. We are able to provide our students with these skills and training through individualized teaching and tutoring, a small and supportive environment, assistance with getting a job, and wrap-around supports through MUL in housing, transportation, and mental health.

Alternative schools are continuing to grow around this country as many school systems struggle to connect with today's youth. Although many systems have counted out these students, we are not counting them out. There is a shift that should occur in Minneapolis and one shift is more community partnerships and true collaboration to provide opportunity for all students, even those at the Urban League Academy.