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Victorious Minds Academy creates relationships between teachers, students

**Justin Murphy** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Something changed this year for Se’mera Harris.

Last year, when she was in fifth grade at Andrew J. Townson School 39 in northeast Rochester, she was terrible. That’s according to her.

“I was talking back to teachers,” she said. “I was yelling and screaming and cursing. I’ve changed a lot.”

Asked how she has changed, she pauses to reflect. That moment of reflection itself is a change.

“I’m better this year,” she said. She pauses again. “I’m a good person.”

That change — not turning “bad” children good, but building their positive self-image — is the culmination of several years of professional development in the Rochester City School District, and the basis for what district leaders believe to be the key to lasting improvement.

The major difference for Se’mera this year is that her teacher, Denise Greenaway, is one of the first to complete training for what the district is calling its Victorious Minds Academy. It is based on antiracism and cultural competency pedagogy and stresses building personal relationships with students and their families.

For Greenaway, that means illustrations of the seven principles of Kwanzaa on the walls and successful men and women of color visiting the classroom on a regular basis through a city-run partnership called Pillars of Hope.

The guests slipped into the roles of aunts and uncles — members of the educational village — as the children consid-

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Sixth-grade students at School 39 gather in a peace circle during class to do an exercise in trust where they try to pass a hole-hoop with breaking contact. It is part of the Victorious Minds Academy program at the school. JAMIE GERMANO/@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

“We could have gotten all on her case, but in those classrooms it’s all about the personal connection. We want to recognize their life, their emotions, their struggle.”

**Jacquelyn Cox,**

principal of School 39

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ered questions about their career paths. The class was full of productive chatter until Greenaway, who’d been as talkative as anyone, asked for five minutes of quiet work on math. She got it.

More fundamentally, the VMA training manifests in a more nurturing approach toward students, difficult to describe but evident in nearly every interaction.

“I don’t know how you bottle that up, but I care about them,” she said. “I think of them like my kids.”

The improvement shows up in data, not just anecdotes. Of the 23 students in Greenaway’s class, 15 said they’d been suspended at least once last year. This year, none have. The pattern repeats in other VMA classrooms in the school.

Overall, suspensions at School 39 are at half of last year's rate. The pattern is the same at Nathaniel Rochester Community School 3, which has several VMA classrooms.

"We're not being called to those classrooms to put out fires like we used to," Principal Jacquelyn Cox said. "I attribute that to better relationships with the kids and the parents ... and not just assuming they're always doing something which is what we sometimes tend to do."

Another student, Mar tasia Council, said she acted out in the past because it was the only way to get noticed by her teachers.

"I got mad, because when I had a good day and did all my work, no one would pay attention to me," she said. "I thought: if I act out, I'll get attention, too. This year I don't have to do that." \*\*\* VMA is part of a suite of programs and approaches the district has adopted over the last four years with the goal of recognizing and eradicating structural racism and white supremacy from classrooms, principals' offices and the downtown headquarters.

"This is a majority African-American school district," said Jackie Campbell, executive director of ROC the Future and part of the early implementation team for VMA. "It makes all the sense in the world to ask how we can support (those students)."

That work began in earnest in 2009, when Joy DeGruy, a national expert on anti-racism and author of the book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, began an ongoing series of visits to Rochester. Professional development seminars grew into developing the curriculum for VMA, in partnership with Susan Goodwin of the Rochester Teacher Center.

Some key elements of DeGruy's message:

- Recognizes the lasting impact of historical trauma, in particular slavery, on students of color.
- Culturally responsive — in particular, recognizing that students of color may learn differently from white students.
- Based on building relationships with both the child and the family rather than just sharing knowledge.
- Builds on students' assets rather than pointing out their deficits.

The most prominent manifestation so far has been the convening of a Community Task Force on School Climate, which developed a new code of conduct designed to be less punitive and reduce suspensions.

That has resulted in steep drops in suspension rates in many buildings. In a related effort, more and more schools have adopted trauma-informed, restorative practices that recognize children cannot be taught unless they feel safe and appreciated.

The ultimate goal, though, has always been a curriculum and pedagogy infused with the value of strong relationships and cultural responsiveness. VMA is the first step toward that.

Cox, the School 39 principal, recalled one day when the value of the VMA training became clear. An older student was sent to the office after acting out with a substitute teacher. Cox sat down and started what she called the "typical adult intervention" — a stern tone, critical and moralizing.

A VMA teacher who knew the student also happened to be in the office. She went over to the girl, took her face in her two hands, looked her in the eyes and said: "This isn't you. What's going on?"

The girl started crying, Cox said. The situation was resolved and she apologized to the substitute teacher for whom she'd been misbehaving.

“We could have gotten all on her case, but in those classrooms it’s all about the personal connection,” Cox said. “We want to recognize their life, their emotions, their struggle.”

A key component of the model is the way it involves parents, not just children.

There are 150 students in VMA at School 39; an evening event earlier this year drew 200 parents, more than any school-wide event had ever brought in.

Melanie Funchess, a board member who has been involved in developing the model, had to circle the block repeatedly to find parking.

“We know what we need to do; now people need to get behind us and support us,” she said. “Over the course of time, we can have our entire district operating this way.” There are now three schools using VMA in some of their classes (Schools 3, 5 and 39), and three others with a lesser degree of involvement. Itonia Owens, a school chief who helps oversee the program, said there have been many requests from other teachers and administrators to join. Fortunately, there is no real cost besides fairly intensive professional development, some of which is provided free by the Rochester Teacher Center.

“VMA isn’t the program,” Owens said. “It’s the relationship you have with the child before you start the program. ... When the relationship is there, (for the child), you can be who you are and be confident and be at peace.”

Back in Denise Greenaway’s classroom, the walls were lined with poster projects the students had done on black historical figures from the career fields that interested them — doctors, scientists, politicians, entertainers.

Leilonye Hutherson said an important part of the assignment was learning about the famous people’s childhood and how it related to her own.

“Mrs. Greenaway tells us she knows we can accomplish anything if we just put our minds to it,” she said. “Maybe we can just ignore the negatives and the racism and pass all that and grow up to be what we want to be.”

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**Se'Mera Harris, a sixth-grader at School 39, was a self-described troubled student last year but says the Victorious Minds Academy at the school has helped her become a better, more confident student this year. PHOTOS BY JAMIE GERMANO/@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**



**Leilonye Hutherson, a sixth-grader at School 39, says the Victorious Minds Academy at the school has helped students learn better and given them confidence to ask more questions.**