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New school opens doors for students

By Kara J. Shire
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RICHMOND - When 14-year-old Anthony Myles II showed an interest in Confederate military leader Stonewall Jackson, his history teacher bought him a book on the Civil War.

It was a small gesture, but to Anthony, it was striking.

"I think my teachers care," he said.

Students at Leadership Public Schools- Richmond say that level of intimacy, combined with academic rigor and a chance to go to college, is what drew them to the region's newest charter high school.

Many are finding the school's focus on small classes and a cohesive student body to be welcome respites from the typical hustle-bustle of traditional schools.

"Everybody here's like a family," said student Jennilyn Megia. "At my other school, there were so many students, I didn't know most of them. I really like this school because everybody's united as one."

Trinidad Pizano agreed. "It's perfect," he said. "Everybody knows each other. There's not a lot of peer pressure."

Leadership Public Schools-Richmond opened in August with a three-day student and teacher retreat at Point Bonita in the Marin Headlands. The getaway was designed to build trust and teamwork among the school's 143 incoming freshmen.

"We spent a good amount of time creating a culture," said Jolene Lane, a Harvard-trained educator who relocated from Rhode Island to become the school's founding principal.

"Our expectations are very high. It's not just getting your academic work done; it's having high expectations for how you treat each other."

The Richmond campus is the first in a series of planned spinoffs based on San Francisco's successful Leadership High School, which has consistently sent more than 90 percent of its graduating seniors, most of whom are minorities, to college.

Founded by former teacher and attorney Mark Kushner, Leadership Public Schools is expected to open campuses in San Jose, Oakland and Marin in the next two years.

Richmond's Leadership Public Schools campus, made up of 10 portable classrooms in the city's Iron Triangle, operates like a traditional public school when it comes to public funding and open enrollment.

But the school's charter status gives it flexibility in designing curricula, hiring teachers, planning a school day and managing its budget.

So when a large number of incoming students were struggling in reading and math, the school decided to scratch science class for a year in favor of a course called academic literacy, created to help students lagging in core subjects.

"We make it very clear that this is going to be a lot of work," Lane said. "You have to be willing to say, 'I want to go to college,' and be willing to work at it."

Leadership Public Schools recruited students from West Contra Costa district middle schools, public festivals, National Night Out events -- anywhere the founders could find teens and parents.

The resulting student body is 86 percent black and Latino, with a majority of the teens coming from Helms and Adams middle schools in San Pablo and Richmond.

The school is projected to expand with 100 new students each year. By 2006, school leaders expect to have 450 students in ninth, 10th, 11th and 12th grades.

Asked how he likes his new school, Stonewall Jackson fan Anthony Myles II said, "It's cool."

"I know almost everybody and everybody knows me," he said. "I get along with everybody and there ain't much problems here."

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