

THE OREGONIAN

GRADUATES IN THE MAKING

Date: Friday, July 2, 2004
Section: LOCAL STORIES
Edition: SUNRISE

Page: D01 PAIGE PARKER - The Oregonian
Illustration: 2 Color Photos by ROB FINCH/The Oregonian

Summary: The Step Up camp is designed to reverse Roosevelt High's high dropout rate

Kim Rodriguez shimmies up a tree, hard hat on her head. The freshman scales the fir, supported by harness and rope, as her Roosevelt High School classmates wait their turn.

"Go get that high school graduation," calls out her counselor, Hanif Fazal. "There's your graduation, one step at a time."

Kim and 99 other Roosevelt students are participating in a weeklong summer camp that may be the only dropout-prevention program of its kind in the nation.

During the 2002-03 school year, Roosevelt, in North *Portland*, posted the highest dropout rate of any of *Portland* Public Schools' 10 comprehensive high schools, according to the Oregon Department of Education. Its one-year dropout rate of 8.2 percent is nearly double the state average. Almost half of Roosevelt's dropouts left during freshman year, which can be a chaotic and isolating time.

Roosevelt's summer camp -- and the year of tutoring and mentoring that follow -- are designed to reverse that trend by keeping freshmen connected to their teachers and each other, Fazal says. The camp, in East Multnomah County, is part of a broader redesign of Roosevelt, which in the fall will split into three schools within the same building.

All 37 students who participated in last year's pilot camp and tutoring completed their freshman year, says Fazal, who created the program with former Roosevelt counselor Robin Mayther. Students' test scores also improved by an average of two grade levels in reading, for example.

The initial success prompted Roosevelt officials to expand the program, called Step Up. This year, about two of every three Roosevelt ninth-graders are attending the optional camp, in three sessions, Mayther says. Staffing the camp are 15 Roosevelt teachers, 24 older students, who will serve as yearlong

mentors, and about 30 adult tutors who will work with students throughout ninth grade.

At camp, students are encouraged to confide in each other as a way to develop trust. They talk about poor habits and behaviors they would like to change when they begin high school. Midweek, students are led through a rope obstacle course in exercises meant to build their self-confidence, teach them problem-solving and encourage them to rely on one another.

When camp is over, students will attend six days of summer school to work on study habits and organization skills. Once the school year starts, they'll be eligible for after-school tutoring and will meet regularly with their peer mentors.

Step Up is paid for with a combination of federal Title 1 funds and supplemental federal money available to Roosevelt because the school has posted inadequate test scores and graduation rates under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. A grant from Comcast and another from the *Children's Investment Fund* provide the rest of the program's funding, says Carole Smith, executive director of Open Meadow, a private alternative school that operates the program for Roosevelt students.

Built-in rewards

Students who participate in Step Up and complete high school will be eligible for up to \$3,000 in college scholarships, paid for by a separate grant, says Connie Mills, an Open Meadow coordinator.

Researchers who study dropout prevention say the combination of the camp, scholarship, tutoring and mentoring make Roosevelt's program unique.

Mary Reimer, an information specialist with the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University in South Carolina, says many schools have developed transition programs for incoming freshmen; few, however, are as comprehensive as Roosevelt's.

Francie Lindner, project director for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, says the camp provides students a chance to bond in a fun environment before they bump into each other in the school hallways.

"It's a great idea," Lindner says. "They're being brought together as a group."

Zach Noid, a 14-year-old from North *Portland* attending the camp, says he considered dropping out during middle school. Medical problems caused him to miss classes and fall behind. He started getting into fights and ended middle school at Open Meadow.

Zach says he wants to change. He's attending Roosevelt's Power school and plans to play football.

At the camp, he sits on a log while Tiana Ross, another freshman, rests her

The committee expects \$8.7 million in levy collections this year. On Tuesday, it set aside as much as \$500,000 for administration, including financial audits.

Of the remaining \$8.2 million, the committee decided 40 percent should go to early childhood programs, 40 percent to after-school and mentoring programs and 20 percent to child-abuse prevention and intervention.

The committee allocated half of the child-abuse money Tuesday and plans to decide on the remainder later this year. It will allocate the after-school and mentoring money this winter.

The process needs work, Saltzman said. Among other flaws noted by reviewers, it needs to allow easier comparisons of applicants' budgets and cost per client served.

"I think everybody is cutting us some slack because this has never been done before," Saltzman said. "But they're expecting improvements next time around."

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