

ACTIVITY

R E P R I N T

REPRINTED FROM ACTIVITY WINTER 2010
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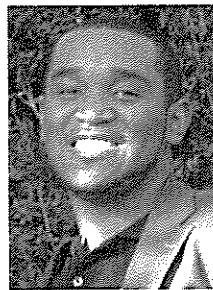
Arkansas After-School Program Turns Students' College Dreams Into Reality

Jonathan Evans is glad he listened to Charity Smith. She helped him increase his achievement level and ACT score, which opened doors to college and research opportunities at Harvard and Yale.

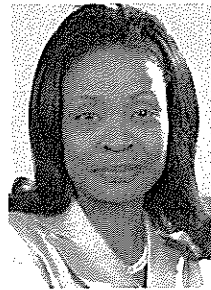
Smith is the assistant commissioner, Division of Academic Accountability for the Arkansas Department of Education. She and colleague Willie Morris, associate director/lead planner for the division, co-founded the Accelerated Academic Achievement Academy in Sherwood, Arkansas, an after-school program that helps minority students improve their academic achievement levels.

Evans attended the academy during his last two years of high school. He is now a senior majoring in nuclear engineering at South Carolina State University.

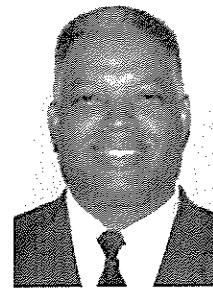
"Dr. Smith told me if I increased my ACT score, colleges would chase me, and she was right. I increased my score from 19 to 26, got offers from several colleges,



Jonathan Evans



Charity Smith



Willie Morris



Rob Kennedy

and received a full-ride scholarship," said Evans. "She changed my life."

Smith and Morris founded the academy four years ago on their own time and at their own expense. They wanted to increase the pool of competitive minority students by providing them with a new pathway to an academically challenging education and college and career options.

"We knew from our research that with extra time and help, minority students could become college and career ready and academically competitive," said Smith. "We believe all kids can learn, but that not all kids have had the opportunity to learn."

Minority and underperforming students are frequently disadvantaged with respect to educational preparation, motivation, family support, school resources, and learning environment. Scholarships often are the only way they can afford to go to college, and good grades and high ACT scores are their ticket to scholarships. The ACT® test is a curriculum-based achievement exam that measures the academic skills taught in schools and deemed important for success in first-year college courses.

Smith and Morris developed a program called PACE, a research-based instructional model that accelerates the speed at which

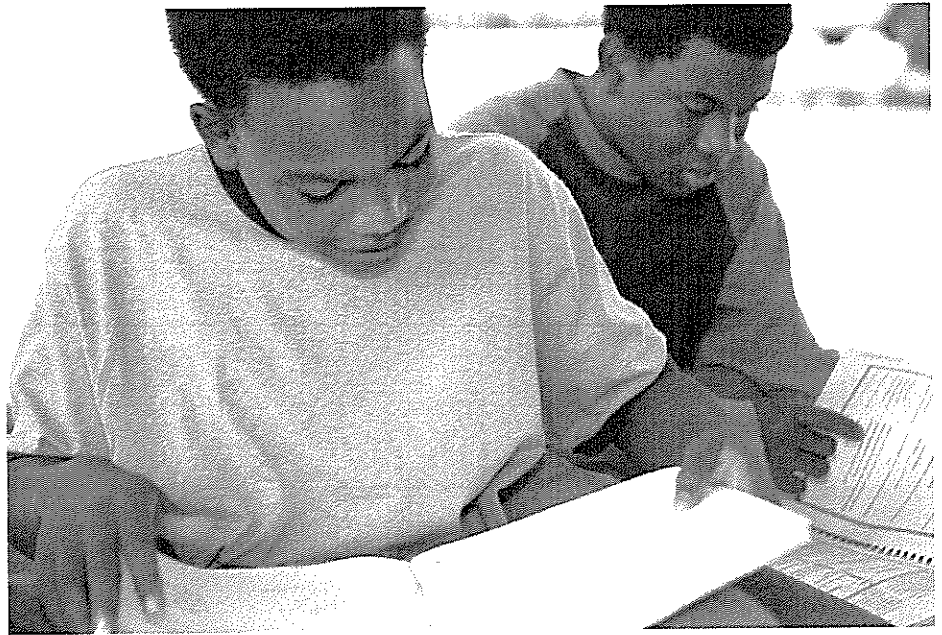
continued on page 2

students acquire, process, and retain new information. It focuses on differentiated instructional teaching strategies that address the individual needs of students. It also provides consistently rigorous tutorial support and utilizes instructional technology to deliver a fast-paced, tailored curriculum with minimal staffing.

“We discovered that there are really only two ways to close achievement gaps and improve academic progress—extend the school day or speed up the rate at which a student learns,” said Morris. “We’ve done both.”

Academy students range from ages three to 19. Though most are from Little Rock and the Pulaski County area, some come from other parts of Arkansas and even from other states. They participate in up to four hours of instruction one or two days a week. Most attend at least one year, even coming over holiday breaks and summers.

Students take individualized computer-based assessments at the start of each session. Teachers use the results to set goals and build lessons around ACT’s College Readiness Standards and Arkansas curriculum frameworks. The College Readiness Standards describe the knowledge and skills colleges expect of students and are directly connected to EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT scores.



Students at the Accelerated Academic Achievement Academy in Sherwood, Arkansas, work on a reading assignment. Academy instructors help students increase their achievement levels and ACT scores.

Classes are capped at 15-20 students each. Group interaction has replaced lectures, older students teach younger ones (and sometimes vice versa), and teachers act as guides and coaches. Student buy-in is crucial to success. “As educators, we make academic improvement plans for students, when in actuality, students need to make their own plans so their goals are doable,” said Smith.

The approach has been successful: student achievement has increased, including performance on the ACT. PACE students average 23.5 on the ACT, compared to the state average of 17 for minority students. All eligible students are now enrolled in major colleges in Arkansas and around the nation.

“We used to think that a two-point gain on the ACT was pretty good. Now we’re getting as high as nine-point gains,” said Smith. “When given the chance, students can reach their potential.”

Rob Kennedy says Smith and Morris are doing amazing work. He is director of the Scholarship and Research Center in the College of Nursing at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

“Students who may have been expected to fail under other circumstances find success at the academy. They learn the joy of learning and the satisfaction that comes with earned accomplishments,” said Kennedy. ♦