

# Gateway to College helping students

The Herald-Sun - Tuesday, November 01, 2011

By MELANIE BUSBEE

*Communications Manager, Durham's Partnership for Children*

**DURHAM** - Eighteen-year-old Keisha Johnson wants to be the director of her own child-care center once she finishes college. Her resource specialist from the Gateway to College program at Durham Tech reminds her of that goal frequently.

To reach her goal, it is important that Johnson knows the realities of what it takes to be a professional in the field of early care and education. First, she needs to be connected with someone working in child care. Durham's Partnership for Children was able to make that connection. By partnering with a local owner of a high-quality child-care center, Johnson is able to talk about the business side of teaching children. She will come to find out that it is not easy work.

Neither is the coursework involved in Johnson's academic path within the Gateway program.

Enrolled since August, Johnson will likely spend the next two years in the Durham Tech program working towards obtaining her high school diploma and earning college credits. The program is designed for 16- to 21 year olds who have dropped out of high school who wish to obtain their high school diploma and earn college credits. There is no cost to students.

Iesha Kyles, a 20-year-old Gateway to College student who came into the program with zero high school credits, has long range plans to be a nurse practitioner. Currently working five days a week as a home health care specialist, Kyles juggles work, school and being a mother to her 3-year-old son. She has just begun her third semester and is now comfortable with the rigorous nature of the program.

"By the time I reach 24, I'll be graduated and able to have a career," Kyles explained. "The program is a lot of work, but I know what I'm here for; there is no fooling around and failure is not an option."

The road to success – even with a second chance – is not an easy one, according to Brendon Comer, director of the Gateway program. Before students are enrolled they must pass a series of tests and take part in both personal and group interviews. Classes are five days a week for 3 hours a day, plus required tutoring sessions and meetings with resource specialists. Homework is an additional challenge.

"I tell people, if these kids bring commitment and effort, they can get the rest while they're here," said Bryan Murphy, resource specialist with the program.

Since its inception one year ago, Gateway has been touted for being supportive of students in a way that most public high schools don't have the capacity to do. The maximum classroom size is 22 students, and each Gateway student is assigned a resource specialist for one-on-one support.

According to Murphy, providing more than just academic support – things like recreation and art programs – is critical to helping students visualize the finish line.

Resource specialist Marguerita Best holds her students to high standards to help them reach their goals.

"Each day I ask them what they are doing to achieve that goal," Best explained. "This is their job now – we are helping them grow from dependent to independent."

Seventeen-year-old De' Ashlee Crawley, who enrolled in the Gateway program in August, admitted that she anticipated she might fail.

"I expected I wouldn't get along with the teachers or the students," said Crawley, who points to disrespectful treatment from teachers as her reason for dropping out of high school. "But the students are treated with care and respect. The teachers believe in us and what we can do. I wouldn't be doing this program if the teachers treated us any other way."

Two students are on track to graduate at the end of the semester. That's two more than before - and research shows that every graduate makes a difference to Durham's local economy.

Research also shows that children who don't have quality family or academic support may be destined to fail. Some students lack adequate levels of support from early on.

Take 19-year-old Gateway student Auntais Faulkner who dropped out of Southern High School three years ago. Faulkner felt he didn't need school anymore. He had grown up living with two siblings and a financially struggling single parent and like many children and adolescents living in low-income households, needs were often unmet. Children come to school unready to learn, unable to focus, and unsupported when it comes to facing tough decisions. Faulkner's decision was to quit school and attempt to enter the workforce without a high school diploma.

"Financially, I understood quickly, if we didn't have things growing up it was because my mom couldn't afford it," he said. "That left a strong impression on me. That was my reason for dropping out of high school."

Faulkner explains that he was bullied all throughout school.

"I had to put on a front for everybody," he said. "That deterred me from going where I was supposed to go - and that was straight. My decision to drop out of high school wasn't very smart, but I ended up here at Gateway," Faulkner said.

Though Gateway to College students will continue to face economic hardship, the woes of single parenting, the stress of a rigorous academic program, and adversity, they will likely be better equipped to combat those challenges in present day. Supports are in place that weren't there before.

"This program is really a golden opportunity," Kyles said. "To get the chance to get your high school diploma and to have someone support you like Gateway does...it's really nice."

A schedule of upcoming Gateway Information Sessions can be found on the Gateway web site at [www.durhamtech.edu/gateway](http://www.durhamtech.edu/gateway). Applicants must register in advance by calling (919) 536-7248.

Qualified applicants meet the following criteria:

- Be 16-21 years old
- Live within the DPS district
- Have dropped out of high school before earning a diploma
- Be behind in high school credits for age and grade
- Read at an eighth-grade level or higher
- Can complete requirements for a high school diploma by age 22
- Have an expressed desire to earn a high school diploma and college degree

For more information about Gateway to College, call 919-536-7248 or visit [www.durhamtech.edu/gateway](http://www.durhamtech.edu/gateway).