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## Aim high: Cunningham boys class sets its sights on college

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IOWA CITY --- The career goals listed by the 16 boys sitting around the conference room table are ambitious: veterinarian, lawyer, teacher, architect, orthodontist, sociologist, judge, doctor, police officer.

And the setting --- Phillips Hall at the University of Iowa --- lends gravity to their declarations, made on a recent Friday. But these aren't high school seniors on the cusp of graduation. They're Waterloo fifth-graders getting ready to move on to middle school.

Jeff Ferguson, the boys' teacher since first grade at Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence, always encouraged setting career goals. For 3 1/2 years, the boys have also known they will benefit from a scholarship fund, created by Dennis Harbaugh and Juanita Williams, to pay for their first two years of college. The Waterloo couple organized the visit and will remain involved with the group throughout middle and high school.

In Iowa City, the class met with doctoral student Ahmad Washington, attended a hands-on physics presentation and walked the university campus. Career goals came up during introductions to Washington.

"It's very rewarding to hear them talk about their college and career plans," Harbaugh said. "Each one of the students has a dream and knows that college is a part of reaching their dream."

"A lot of kids this age aren't even thinking about college," said parent Laquonedrian Jones. Her son, Anthony Ross, "actually talks about" attending college.

Washington told the class, which is all black males, that it is not enough to arrive at college. They also need to understand "what it takes to be successful when you get to campus."

Dequann Washington knows how to achieve it: "You've got to keep your grades up and you've got to be here every day."

Ahmad Washington encouraged students to create a vision board with inspiring images and words. "Also, write down your goals and aspirations. Don't ever let anyone discourage you from accomplishing what you want to accomplish."

'Spark of interest'

Harbaugh and Williams, who started the scholarship fund with an \$85,000 apartment building mortgage, wanted to focus on a group of black children.

They hope to help build the economic independence of Waterloo's black community, which faces greater poverty than other population segments.

"One of our goals was to try and light a spark of interest in attending college in each student, and we think we've accomplished that," Harbaugh said. "Now, it's just a matter of keeping that spark lit for the next seven years."

Ferguson's class is part of a district effort to narrow an achievement gap for black students. He helped pilot single-gender classrooms and has taught these boys for five years to better-tailor the education to their needs. But, the boys will be in a new situation next year at George Washington Carver Academy.

"What we're doing now this spring is focusing on the transition to middle school," Harbaugh said.

They also have been working to raise enough money to give each student two years tuition-free at an Iowa public university.

"Our estimated total that we need to fund the tuition promise is about \$395,000 (about \$24,650 per student)," Harbaugh, said.

The couple recruited 10 people last fall for a fundraising push when the total stood at \$150,000.

"They raised over \$100,000 in pledges over the next three years," Harbaugh said. "So that's really helping build a strong base of support. The fund now has over \$208,000 in it."

Among more than 225 donors are one couple that gave proceeds from their annual garage sale, another couple that gave proceeds from their sweet corn stand and a teenager who donated \$1,200 in pledges for participating in a triathlon. Additionally, at least 25 businesses, churches and service organizations have provided financial or in-kind support. Jones said it would be hard for her son to afford college without the fund.

"I'm a community college student and, just for the amount that I owe and I haven't even got a degree, I feel that is a blessing," she said. "To me, (the visit is) a great experience, and hopefully they realize the chance they had and take advantage of it."

The visit was "a wonderful experience," said Tanzania X, Davion Givens' mother. "It gives an idea of what college is about and keeps them inspired."

Givens said it is "fun to get a look at other colleges and the choices we might have when we get out of high school." With either an architecture or engineering degree in mind, he was impressed to see the university's engineering building on the walking tour.

Ferguson called his students' enthusiasm "really exciting" to see. "The highlight for me was when they were going around introducing themselves and hearing their goals."

Of course, he has heard the students' goals before.

"It's the setting and it's kind of like a culmination now," he said. "How well they speak, it just kind of blows me away. I think they will see themselves going to college, that visualization that we started years ago."