

Wednesday, May 20, 2009 12:01 PM CDT

Community comes together for scholarships

A scholarship fund that could pay for two years of college for 16 area boys will make their success over the next several years interesting to track.

Last Sunday, The Courier featured the boys' trip to the University of Iowa --- another step in keeping them focused on getting to college.

The boys have been together in class since the Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence first piloted single-gender education for Waterloo Community Schools in 2005. They enter middle school in the fall.

For the past 3 1/2 years, the boys have known they will benefit from the fund, created by Dennis Harbaugh and Juanita Williams --- with the hope of helping build the economic independence of Waterloo's black community, which faces greater poverty than other population segments.

The estimated total to fund the tuition promise is about \$395,000. Harbaugh and Williams started the scholarship fund with an \$85,000 apartment building mortgage. Last fall the couple recruited 10 people for a fundraising push and the fund now has \$208,000 in it, with more coming in pledges.

Among the more than 225 donors are one couple that gave proceeds from their annual garage sale, another couple gave proceeds from their sweet corn stand, and a teenager donated \$1,200 in pledges for participating in a triathlon. At least 25 businesses, churches and service organizations have provided support.

"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."

So far, the intention of sparking an interest in going to college among this group of kids seems to be working.

We need to find ways to spread this spark throughout the Cedar Valley. It's never too early to get kids thinking about college. As they enter middle school, it will soon allow them to tailor classes to their goals.

Helping to get kids to college and eventually to productive and rewarding careers is a great gift. As we follow these students, we also need to see how we can expand on Harbaugh's and Williams' vision --- so that the help to start and maintain a successful educational and life course doesn't rely on the luck of being chosen for a program.

For sure, this is a long-term commitment. We all are rooting for the success of these boys because the greatest gift from Harbaugh, Williams, donors and educators may eventually turn out to be more evidence that reaching kids early can make all the difference in the world.