

GOOD NEWS



Gardening Club by NextUp RVA partner Greater Richmond Fit4Kids. COURTESY NEXTUP RVA

City middle schoolers given new paths to learning, after school

When Jayden Valentine entered 6th grade last fall at Thomas H. Henderson Middle School, he was often quiet among his peers and teachers. He did not speak up in his classes. With encouragement from his mother, Jayden enrolled in NextUp, a free, coordinated system of after-school programs for City of Richmond middle schools. "We have to show our children that we are actively engaged in their learning and social development in order for them to excel as individuals," said Jayden's mom.

Along with nearly 500 students enrolled this year in NextUp at Henderson, Boushall and Lucille Brown middle schools, students like

Jayden have access to unique learning experiences, after the school day ends. By participating in programs such as TechConnect and Creativity U, Jayden explores his interest in computers, as well as his place in his community. This led Jayden last fall to apply for, and earn, a job assisting in snack clean-up with NextUp partner, Higher Achievement. He proved to be extremely efficient in his job and in assisting other students when needed.

"Middle school is a critical juncture in young teens' lives. They're becoming more independent, and how they spend their time after school can go right or wrong," said NextUp's executive director Barbara Couto Sipe.

"NextUp is giving kids opportunities to explore their interests, express themselves and have fun, all in a safe, secure environment."

In Virginia, 36 percent of middle school students care for themselves after school, yet only 9 percent participate in after-school programs. NextUp is among a growing crop of expanded learning systems in cities across the United States, offering structured learning opportunities to economically disadvantaged students. Since its inception in 2013, NextUp and its network of providers have served 1,000 middle school students.

NextUp is committed to serving youth at Richmond middle schools, where about three-fourths of the families are considered economically disadvantaged. A solid collaboration with service providers offers youth the chance to explore their interests, gain confidence in leadership and have fun while learning something new — after the school day ends, in a safe, secure environment.

Walk into any partner school, and you'll see students laughing, teaming together to solve projects and interacting with program leaders.

"I think NextUp is so wonderful because they have nice people and it gives me enough time to do fun things," Shamiyah Perry, a 6th grader at Boushall Middle School, said recently. "I also have made new friends and something I learn could be very useful when I have a test."

In collaboration with Richmond Public Schools, NextUp contracts with Higher Achievement, YMCA, Communities in Schools of Richmond and more than 30 high-quality service providers to deliver a variety of programs beyond the regular school curriculum, in areas of the Arts, STEM, Leadership, Work Readiness, Sports and Wellness. Students can choose to learn computer coding, cooking, team-building through

sports and exercise, performing and visual arts, forensic science, gardening and much more.

Teachers, parents and school administrators are seeing the positive improvements in students participating in NextUp. "It (NextUp) has made some major changes with her attitude at home; she acts more mature and now has friends. It is making a real difference in our family," noted Shakeila Marshall, Shamiyah's mother.

Student outcomes collected by NextUp show that approximately two-thirds have improved or maintained positive school attendance and improved or maintained good grades. More than three-fourths of NextUp students improved or maintained positive behavior, felt challenged in a good way, and learned to get along better with peers. Outcomes show students are more engaged in learning and more motivated to attend school each day.

"Keeping young people on the right path provides benefit to not only our youth and families, but also our schools and city," noted Sipe. "It's our hope in the years to come that every Richmond middle schooler will have access to the quality learning opportunities that this community is capable of providing."

For more information, visit nextuprva.org. As a not-for-profit charitable organization, NextUp relies on support from individuals, corporations and foundations to help put more middle school youth on the path to success.

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