

A no-grades approach imported by Camden mixes schoolwork with job experience and mentors in places such as a **hospital ...**



Met student Natasha Luigui, 17, helps nurse Teri Linton (left) make up a bed at Miriam Hospital in Providence, R.I.

ERIC MENCHER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

## Students get chance to have career years

### Reinventing High School

One in an occasional series on changes under way to prepare students to compete in a global economy.

By Melanie Burney  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — When she entered high school, Natasha Luigui wanted to become a preschool teacher, so she landed an internship at a day-care center.

She discovered she was not suited for teaching. "The kids were kind of aggravating," she said. "I don't have patience for that."

After school internships at a nonprofit agency, a barbershop, and a hospital, she finally found her niche: medicine.

Luigui, 17, is a senior at the Metropoli-

tan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence, where there are no tests or grades. Students have advisers instead of teachers, spend three days a week in school and two days on internships, and are encouraged to pursue their passion or interests largely through independent study and, it is hoped, find a career.

As educators debate how to reinvent public high schools, many districts across the country are turning to alternative programs such as The Met to boost perfor-

See **CAREER** on A17

### ... a TV studio ...



ERIC MENCHER / Inquirer Staff

**Micah Thompson, 17**, directs a weekly TV program at The Met, a Big Picture school in Providence that has met federal standards with advisers instead of teachers.

### ... a barbershop ...



ERIC MENCHER / Inquirer Staff

**Met student Anthony Molina** gives adviser Andrew Frishman a trim at the Providence barbershop where he is an intern. About 75 percent of The Met's seniors enroll in college.

### ... and a law office



MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff

**Nicole Middleton, 14**, files papers at a Camden law office during an internship through MetEast High, which has introduced the Rhode Island model to this region.

-ance and graduation rates.

This year, Camden became the first district in New Jersey and the only one in the region to adopt The Met's model. Big Picture, the company that operates The Met, wants to open a school in Philadelphia and is talking to public and private educators.

"We will make people think about what education really is," said Elliot Washor, codirector of The Met. A cluster of six small schools on three campuses that enroll about 750 pupils, mostly poor black or Hispanic students, The Met has a record that tops many public high schools in Rhode Island.

In the 2004-05 school year, it met language arts and math standards under the federal No Child Left Behind law. Its graduation rate is 94 percent, and about 75 percent of its seniors each year enroll in college. Three out of four who continued their education earned a degree or are still working toward one.

"For a program that looks so soft, I've never seen such consistency," said Rhode Island Education Commissioner Peter McWalters, an advocate of the school's approach. "It's rigorously pressureful."

Founded in 1996 by Washor and Dennis Littky, a veteran educator in the forefront of school reform efforts, The Met has replicated its successful design as Big Picture Schools. So far, 30 have opened in 11 cities in eight states, and more are planned, including one in Australia. Their goal is to help African American and Hispanic students graduate from high school.

Each school must follow the Big Picture design, such as internships, small enrollment - no more than 120 students - and "advisories" instead of classes. Districts have some leeway to tailor their schools to local needs and state standards. To improve the high school experience, districts must embrace sweeping changes, said Ross Wiener, policy director for the nonprofit Education Trust.

"It means that we have to try something very different," Wiener said. "We have to be open to new approaches and new ideas."

'A different... environment'

Nicole Middleton, a freshman at MetEast High in Camden, spends two days a week at mentor Troy Archie's law firm. "It's a different learning environment," Middleton, 14, said while filing papers in the downtown office. "You learn here just like you learn in school."

Other MetEast students have rotating internships at places such as a funeral home, hospitals, schools, and an athletic center. They must spend at least three months on each assignment.

Maxine Quinones, 15, an aspiring surgeon, landed an internship in the emergency room at Virtua Health Camden. She plans to intern next in an auto-body shop and possibly a dance studio. "I want to try different things."

MetEast opened in the old Challenge Square building on Kaighn Avenue in September with 42 freshmen chosen by lottery, and high expectations. A class will be added each year.

Although the Philadelphia School District has had no official discussions about opening a school, said Albert Bichner, deputy chief academic officer, it has begun creating smaller learning environments and embraced some concepts touted by Big Picture, such as personalized learning.

"We're looking at everything. Our students aren't achieving at the levels that they should be," Bichner said.

The same holds true in Camden, where only about half the students who enter the two main high schools receive diplomas, and fewer than a third attend college.

Superintendent Annette D. Knox expressed optimism that MetEast's learning approach would make a difference in South Jersey's largest public school system.

"It's the wave of the future," she said. "It's a win-win for our youngsters."

Educators believe MetEast students will thrive in a close-knit school where advisers closely monitor their progress and regularly meet with parents. Students have the same adviser and classmates for four years, and must have a mentor from outside the school.

"They just love to come to school every day," principal Timothy Jenkins said. Attendance averages about 95 percent, compared with about 75 percent for the two main high schools.

Some students said they were not sure what to expect but wanted an alternative to the crowded main high schools. "I was shocked at first when they said we don't have any grades," Quinones said. "I was like, 'Wow. Are we going to learn anything?'"

Rather than a set curriculum, students have personal learning plans based on their strengths and weaknesses. As about a dozen students spent an afternoon with adviser James Thompson, two quietly conducted Internet research on computers while another read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

Quinones was developing a fictitious \$10 million budget and a pie graph - an assignment designed to improve quantitative reasoning, one of the school's five learning goals.

A team preparing for a debate on the execution of former gang leader Stanley "Tookie" Williams had a heated exchange. The project met two learning goals: social reasoning and communication.

Students also must learn empirical reasoning and develop personal qualities. Community service, a senior thesis project, and a 75-page autobiography are required for graduation.

Students demonstrate proficiency through projects that incorporate math, history, language arts and science. At the end of each quarter, they present a 45-minute oral "exhibition" to a review panel that includes their peers, parents, mentor and adviser.

"You can give a student a grade and a grade means nothing," Thompson said. "This is the most effective way to get a student to really perform at his best."

50 schools sought by 2008

Big Picture schools also operate in Chicago; Denver; Detroit; Indianapolis; Oakland, Calif.; Sacramento, Calif.; and San Diego. Half are charter schools, and half are traditional public schools.

The Big Picture movement is partly supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which donated \$16 million, mostly for training, and hopes to open 50 schools by 2008.

McWalters, the Rhode Island education commissioner, said some students, especially those who need structure, might perform well at a Big Picture school.

"It only goes bad when you're lazy," said Rosalie Botkin 16, a junior at The Met.

Publicly funded with an annual \$8.8 million budget, The Met operates as its own district. About 75 percent of its students come from Providence, and the rest from nearby towns.

This year, the Rhode Island Board of Regents commended The Met for math and language arts gains for two consecutive years. It has ranked among the top high schools for attendance, climate, instruction and parent involvement for the last five years.

The central campus in South Providence, opened in 2002, has four buildings that resemble a small college community, with a fitness center, a technology center, and a kitchen for culinary classes. Its theme is "One Student at a Time." "We try to push kids to do things they've never tried," principal Nancy Diaz said. "We're taking the boredom out of school."

Senior Odyssey Smith, 17, who plans to study nursing, said the school had made her work harder "instead of just settling for less."

"It's always something I want to learn," she said.

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