

THE STUDENT TRACK: MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA BEATING THE ODDS

Buoyed by his family, teachers and lessons learned from the TAP System, Quentin Hardrict Jr. is determined to never give up in the name of learning

“The odds are against you.”

That was the constant reminder that Demekia Love instilled in her middle son, Quentin, to motivate him to persevere in difficult situations. He lost his father when he was six years old. Love worked hard as a single mother to pick her family up, determined to never allow her children to become statistics. “What you do is a big deal for me,” she told her son.

Those words stuck with him as his family began to rebuild their home life. Paulette Crank, Hardrict Jr.’s paternal grandmother, remained in her home state of Illinois, but was deeply involved in his daily life. She provided much-needed love, encouragement and life lessons.

“My mom and grandma gave me my discipline,” he said.

He would need it. Understanding that a quality education would be her children’s ticket to success, Love placed them at Sojourner Truth Academy (STA), a pre-K-8 public charter school in North Minneapolis. The school’s six values hit home: respect, compassion, diligence, responsibility, integrity and perseverance. Unlike a traditional city school, the smaller charter school puts a sharp focus on individualized student-teacher interaction and roots its instruction in character building as much as it does academics.

Love quickly embraced the community, and the Hardrict-Love household became one of the school’s most supportive families.

When Hardrict Jr. entered the sixth grade, a new initiative would take shape at STA, strengthening the community of teachers and students even more.



Quentin Hardrict Jr. (left) and family, from left to right: cousin Kayla Adams, grandmother Paulette Crank, brother Quaylan Hardrict and sister Quenshae Love

STA began implementing TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement in 2012. With the help of a federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, STA leaders and faculty would hone their skills to create comprehensive systems of teacher leadership, professional development, educator observation and evaluation, and performance-based compensation.

At the heart of the TAP System was the leadership team — a group of teachers and administrators who would guide weekly professional development sessions based on student strategies that targeted individual needs. Those strategies would then be field-tested with a group of students and refined accordingly before being implemented in the classroom.

According to STA Executive Director Julie Guy, Hardrict Jr. reveled in this process and became one of the star field-testers. “We often engaged Quentin in field-testing,” said Guy. “He would be open and honest, letting us know when the strategies were good or if there were things that weren’t working. His input helped drive the implementation of strategies throughout the building.”

Hardrict Jr. began to notice the increase in teacher collaboration around common goals. “I knew that the things they were doing would benefit us in the future,” he said.

The extra support involved teacher leaders observing classrooms, co-teaching and working hand-in-hand with the classroom teachers to ensure that students understood the concepts. For Hardrict Jr., the additional help was essential.

His math teacher, Margaret Fitzgerald, became director of upper school teaching and learning as part of the TAP System implementation. After Fitzgerald took her leadership position, she devoted time to help him through the transition to a new math teacher and a new approach.

“She cared so much, and would find ways to make the day better,” Hardrict Jr. said.

Fitzgerald stayed after school to help him with his homework, all the while working alongside the new teacher to provide direct support on student needs. Throughout this process of greater teacher and student reflection, Hardrict Jr. and the other students were able to better identify their strengths and weaknesses and ask meaningful questions.

Guy attributes these characteristics to a “trickle-down effect” of the TAP System from teachers to students. “Kids became their own advocates,” she said. “The TAP System gave them the voice to ask questions they needed to ask.”

At STA, students learned questioning as a science and an art. To develop students’ higher-order thinking — an important skill to carry them through college, career and life — Guy understood that the effort needed to start with the way classrooms were structured, and that teachers needed to do the “heavy lifting.”

With the help of the TAP System’s rubric that details what questioning should look and sound like, teachers collaborated on strategies that would help their students think smarter. Their classrooms became places of discourse, where the teachers became the facilitators. Sentence frames were used to assist students in articulating their thoughts, and “turn-and-talks” allowed them to share their views with a peer.

The questioning techniques made students more reflective across the curriculum, and parents were seeing the results of the strengthened communication among teachers and students.

Love thought about transitioning her children into a traditional middle school, but the greater focus on teacher-student interaction through the TAP System convinced her to keep them at STA.

“The teachers moved together, worked together, communicated with each other and helped the individual student,” she said. “I really liked that.”

Hardrict Jr. went on to become salutatorian of his graduating class, an achievement that was not only personal for him, but also for his entire family.

When it was time for Hardrict Jr. to go to his neighborhood high school, Columbia Heights, he was well-prepared for the transition. Guy and the STA faculty made the school families aware that transitioning from a charter academy to a large, traditional public high school could be difficult, particularly without the proper support. Hardrict Jr. took comfort in the lessons he learned at STA, coupled with the fact that his older sister, Quenshae, was thriving at the high school.

Hardrict Jr. is now a sophomore at Columbia Heights and maintains a 3.6 grade point average. However, he admits that good grades do not come without hard work. “I have a few tough classes,” he said. He explained that the key is to “set goals, never backtrack and never get behind.”

He makes sure to place a top priority on doing his homework and turning it in on time. Other rules he lives by are to try his best, never give up, work hard — and ask questions. 📚



Quentin Hardrict Jr. with Margaret Fitzgerald