



From left to right: Edgardo Llanos, Derryn Pinette and Adolfo Manon work during the NorthStar Learning after school program. Below: Jose Matias works on homework during time at the NorthStar after school learning program. It's been a year since NorthStar Learning Centers in partnership with the New Bedford Public Schools opened a dropout-prevention program for 30 low-achieving students, who were then entering New Bedford High School. Most had very low attendance. Now sophomores, these kids are thriving some are even on the honor roll.

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NEW BEDFORD — Jose Matias will be the first to tell you he wasn't the greatest student in middle school.

He said he didn't have a good attitude and his grades were poor.

On paper, he was considered "at-risk" and "low-income" — two labels that combined are too often not promising.

But Jose Matias has defied the odds. Today, the 10th-grader is on the honor roll at New Bedford High School. He boasted that his last report card consisted of all As and a B.

"I owe it all to Quantum. They got me where I am today. My grades and attitude towards school have both improved," said Jose, 16.

Jose and 24 other New Bedford High School sophomores are the fledgling class of the NorthStar Learning Center's Quantum Opportunities Program. They have been in the program since its inception in January of 2011.

Quantum is a four-year program for youth entering high school that aims to boost high school graduation rates and enrollment numbers for college.

Funded by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, the Quantum Program also provides leadership development, community service, and personal enrichment opportunities.

By all accounts, the teens have made a communal Quantum leap:

They've collectively averaged a half-grade GPA improvement; two have made the honor roll; three joined ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) and all have significantly improved their school attendance and attitude toward school, said Quantum Director Jenna Costa.

"These were kids with low-attendance rates and high suspension rates. These were kids who were not at all engaged at school. They did not want to be there," said Costa.

But after one year in the Quantum Program, out-of-school suspensions have decreased to almost none.

"We have one kid in Photography club, three in ROTC, one in sports, two on honor roll. They have literally done a 180," Costa said.

How?

A regimented schedule, totaling some 250 hours per year, of tutoring, field trips, summer jobs and community service is combined with tremendous effort from all staff involved, especially Costa and Youth Coordinator Jason Perry.

Costa and Perry literally call the students in the morning to make sure they're in school. They drive them home after tutoring every day. Last summer, they helped 14 of their students get summer jobs, Costa said.

But Quantum focuses on more than academics; the program also stresses building well-rounded citizens.

Every Friday, participants go on a trip, whether it's going out to eat, to a movie or to tour a local college.

Costa recalled taking the group to dinner at The Cheesecake Factory in Providence to "teach them to order off a menu."

"One kid asked me, 'What's an appetizer?' Going out to eat may seem like nothing to you or me, but these kids have never had the money to spend at a restaurant. They don't know how to look at a menu and order for themselves," she said.

"A lot of them had never been out of housing projects before Quantum. They didn't know what was in Dartmouth, never mind Boston or New York," Costa said. "They're not exposed to life outside their neighborhood."

With Quantum, the kids have been camping in the mountains of New Hampshire, rock climbing at Carabiner's in New Bedford, and they've traveled to museums in New York City.

They've heard Gov. Deval Patrick speak at the Statehouse in Boston; met state legislators; gone to Six Flags; completed the Walk for Hunger in Boston and attended basketball games, and toured colleges around New England.

Up next, they plan to see The Blue Man Group perform in Boston; make a return trek in The Walk for Hunger in Boston, and take a trip to Washington D.C. to tour the National Mall and Howard University.

The Quantum Program is run by The NorthStar Learning Center on Linden Street. Founded in 1974, NorthStar is a state-certified minority non-profit organization that was born from local community action during the civil rights movement.

Its mission is "to provide individualized, strength-based, family-focused programs that help children, youth, and families realize their strengths and dreams "» We are committed to serving the underserved and reaching the 'hard-to-reach.'"

Since January of 2011, the 25 Quantum kids have headed to their after-school classroom when the regular school day ends at 2:07 p.m.

On Monday and Tuesdays, they eat a quick snack and work on their homework until around 3:30 p.m. From 3:30 to 5 p.m, they meet for Group Discussion which could be about anything from anger management to sex ed.

On Wednesdays and Thursdays, they go to UMass Dartmouth, to work one-on-one with their college student mentors.

Jose said, "I love going to UMass. The mentors are our age. It's more interesting when you're learning from someone your own age."

"We don't just focus on academics. It's life skills, leadership skills, and developmental skills; anything that helps them become a respectable citizen," Costa said.

She has brought Quantum students to various meetings with school administrators, educators and School Committee members.

Recently, Jose discussed dropout prevention at a meeting with 10 New Bedford High School teachers, something he "never ever would have done" a year ago, Costa said.

"But honest to God, he was almost leading the meeting. He was honest, he was vocal. He talked to these adults without feeling judged. It was amazing," Costa said.

Jose said the Quantum Program is "great. I love it. Jenna and Jay treat us like family. They help us with school work, or if we have personal problems. I'm on Honor Roll because of them. I think it makes a huge difference in the lives of kids who are struggling. It did for me."

This first class of Quantum students were chosen by random lottery after they submitted applications last year.

Costa said she received some 200 applications after she went around to freshman classes explaining the program to students. Some teachers and guidance counselors also suggested students to her, she said.

Quantum sent the 71 applications that were fully filled out to Washington D.C. to the Eisenhower Foundation, which funds the program. That foundation chose 30 students by lottery. Five have since moved out of the school system.

"The New Bedford Quantum Opportunity Program is providing youth with the kind of mentoring and support that helps them work through challenges that can lead to teenage pregnancy, high dropout rates, low academic achievement, and poverty," said Dr. Alan Curtis, President and CEO of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation.

"This investment in human potential will give children in need a lifeline and open the door for these young people to reach for America's promise," he said.

NorthStar Executive Director Maria Rosario added, "These young people know that the staff care about them unconditionally and that makes all the difference in the world."

Added Costa, "I'm so passionate about this program. I love these kids; I'm so proud of them. It's a powerful thing to see kids this want to want to do well in school and go to college."