

## In new accelerator schools, a diploma after two years

Program designed for kids who fell behind, lowering drop-out risk



*Uniforms are required of students at the accelerator schools as are three-ring binders used by Mark Griffin, 15 (left), Tian Moore, 18, and Delvin Ford, 16, to take notes. (Baltimore Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum / August 26, 2009)*

By Liz Bowie

August 31, 2009

When she was in elementary school, Maria Parris fell behind two grades, and since then has always felt awkward being so much older than her classmates. This year she is getting a chance to catch up in one of Baltimore's three new accelerator schools, which will give her a concentrated version of high school in two years.

"I am just glad I am here to get put in my right grade and graduate on time," said Parris, who is attending the Baltimore Community School.

The 15-year-old began to like school after she moved in with her grandmother and her home life

stabilized during middle school. "I got more serious in school. I just like being at school," she said. But she wasn't entirely happy, feeling much older than the others around her and stuck behind, not expected to graduate until she was 20 instead of 18.

Parris and the 800 students who are starting in accelerator schools this year will be trying a relatively new concept in education that is designed to help 14- to 21-year-olds graduate who are at a higher risk for dropping out.

At the Baltimore Community School on Fait Avenue in Southeast Baltimore, students will only take courses that they will need to satisfy the minimum state requirements for graduation, rather than the electives that they would normally have during their four years. They will complete each grade in half a year.

While Baltimore city, along with Baltimore and Howard counties, opens schools today, the accelerator schools opened last week because the students will go to class two weeks longer each year.

Baltimore Community School Principal Brian Jones said the school will concentrate on teaching students skills they need to graduate. So in English, the students will focus on learning to write coherent sentences and paragraphs as much as on the plot of the book they are reading. And in math, teachers will make sure students have basic arithmetic skills before moving to algebra.

Students choose to go to the school and went through a lengthy interview process this summer, Jones said, and he did reject a number of applicants. He wanted to be assured that the students really wanted to graduate from high school and that they are willing to abide by a few strict rules.

Students must wear uniforms and cannot take cell phones to school even if they are riding an hour across town on the bus, and Jones checks every student at the door in the morning to make sure they are carrying a three-ring binder. The binder is supposed to be evidence they are serious about doing their homework, keeping their papers together and taking notes. The halls of the school are spotless, the classes are small (no more than 22 students) and there is none of the chattering common in a large city public high school.

"So far, I really like the teachers. They are very hands-on, and they work with you. They offer e-mail addresses and coach classes," said Parris.

Ethan Tyson, 18, decided to transfer from [Frederick Douglass](#) High School, a large neighborhood school, to the new school and has found it a lot easier without the crowds, distractions and noise.

Besides the dismal dropout rate that has haunted the city schools for years, about a quarter of the city schools' students have repeated at least one grade and 6.5 percent of city students are two grades behind. As a result, many students are "over-age" in their grades. The [Johns Hopkins University](#) education researcher Ruth Neild, who has studied dropouts, said being over-age is an independent predictor for students dropping out.

She said that most often, those who dropped out have been in high school spinning their wheels for a couple of years. They tend to leave when they are 17 because they have amassed only a few credits toward graduation.

So the school system was searching for ways to keep students in schools and found two models, one in New York and another in Philadelphia, that appear to have had some success. The school system then contracted with nonprofits Diploma Plus and One Bright Ray to open the schools here this year.

Besides the Baltimore Community School, two other schools are opening: Baltimore Liberation Diploma Plus High School on Dukeland Street and Baltimore Antioch Diploma Plus High School in the Fairmont Harford High School campus on Harford Road.

"We have brought models that have worked in other districts. We expect them to help us succeed with our students where previous efforts have failed," said schools CEO Andrés Alonso. "They need flexibility and intense individualization that these schools should provide."

The schools receive the same funding as a regular city school, but the Open Society Institute has given a \$675,000 grant to offset start-up costs.

Tammy Nielson, coordinator of the office of new initiatives in the city schools, said students in the accelerator schools will still have to meet all the Maryland requirements to graduate, including passing the High School Assessments and taking four math and English credits as well as gym, health and technology education. The state does not prescribe how many hours of a subject equates to a single year credit, although it requires students to go to school 180 days a year.

She said the schools are not intended just for those who have fallen behind, but also for the pregnant teenager who won't finish if she has to juggle a child and school for four years or for teenagers who must assume some of the financial responsibilities of their family households.

One reason the accelerator schools are attractive to students is because, as public schools, they are free; if the students choose to earn a GED, they would need to pay for it since the state does not offer public funds toward earning a GED.

The schools are each divided into two parts: The first is a Transformation school designed for students ages 14 to 16 who spend one year learning middle school skills they need to be successful in high school. The second part is the Accelerator school for 16- to 21-year-olds that is a two-year high school program.

Jones said 85 percent of the students at the Bright Ray Schools in Philadelphia area have made it through, far better than the roughly 50 percent to 60 percent of students who graduate after four years in Baltimore.

But the idea is still relatively new. Neild said, "I don't think it is a negative that there isn't a lot of

research on it. Baltimore is now more on the cutting edge by putting them in place."

But trying something new to help thousands of students is worth the risk, said OSI's education director, Jane Sundius, who has been examining alternative schools. "I am not sure we have a choice," she said. If the students drop out, chances are they will have a difficult time making a living.

Tian Moore, 18, had dropped out of school after the 10th grade, but last week he entered Baltimore Community School. "It is a second chance," he said.