

Durham dropouts get diploma

Nontraditional learning center helps students graduate quickly

By Leah Campbell
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Rashaud Trice's high school diploma may look the same as anyone else's, but his path to graduation was undoubtedly different.

After spending almost four years at the Durham School of the Arts and barely managing sophomore status, Trice's guidance counselor called for an academic intervention.

"I was flunking out without really realizing it," 20-year-old Durham native Trice said. "I was so concerned with being Mr. Popular, you know? And that came so easily. I felt like I was succeeding when I wasn't at all."

The intervention came in the form of the Durham Performance Learning Center, a national initiative with Communities in Schools. CIS is an organization committed to helping young people achieve in school, turn away from violence, graduate and prepare for life after academics.

The Durham Performance Learning Center aims to help students who prefer a nontraditional high school setting, are self-motivated and want to graduate quickly. It is an ideal setting for teenagers at high risk of dropping out. Many students at the center have academic skills but are behind on their course credits because of non-academic challenges.

Center hopefuls must have passed the eighth grade mathematics and reading end-of-grade tests, both parts of the computer skills exam and been enrolled in high school for at least a year. Most students come to the center between the ages of 16 and 20.

"I would have aged out of traditional high school way before finishing my course of study," Trice said. "Without the center I'd be in an adult education program still pushing for my diploma at age 20. Instead, I'm at Durham Tech. I would have never taken that



Staff photo by Leah Campbell

Students gather in the Holton Career and Resource Center courtyard after finishing their classes. About 100 students attend the center.

initiative without PLC."

The Durham Performance Learning Center opened in 2007 and is located at 401 N. Driver St. in Durham. It is one of 40 performance learning centers in the United States – five of which are in North Carolina. Each center works hand in hand with the public school system, which funds the project, to deal with applications, enrollment and staffing.

The facility, now located in the Holton Career and Resource Center, was made possible after a \$17 million refurbishment of the former Holton Middle School. The renovations, available for the 2010 school year, moved students into a more conducive learning environment than the center's previous location in the Northgate Mall basement.

"Childbirth, employment issues and the general social environment can all be addressed and worked through here," Danny Gilfort, the center's first and only principal, said about small schools like the center.

With about 100 students attending the center, class sizes are personalized and have a student to teacher ratio of 18-to-1. Students get individualized graduation plans, school counselor Cathy Jones said. There are extensive mentoring programs and a higher degree of parental involvement than in

a traditional high school setting.

"It's like it was in elementary school," Jones said. "The parents are invited to the school several times a year and can plan conferences with the teachers so they can stay involved."

With 70 percent of students reaching graduation, the center is helping Durham public schools continue the trend of having a lower dropout rate than the state average for the last three years.

In 2009, 4.46 percent of students in Durham's public school system dropped out – roughly 570 students. Of those students who dropped out, 187 decided to return to nontraditional schools, like the center, for a second chance to finish their education, and 70 percent were successful in reaching graduation.

"If you're a motivated person who has made some mistakes in your life, this is the school for you," Trice said.

Trice graduated in January 2010 and has a solid GPA at Durham Technical Community College. He plans to transfer to North Carolina Central University and graduate with a degree in criminal justice to pursue his dream of becoming a law officer. Like many of the center's graduates, Trice is the first in his household to attend college.

"You can't join the police force without a diploma," Trice said. "It all started with PLC."