

## Path to college a tough one for grad to negotiate

*Continued from Page 1*

need most is a support system that can provide encouragement and practical information.

Increasingly, schools and others are expanding their efforts to help students navigate through school and life. But the programs are too small to reach all the students who need them.

That means some kids will continue to be doomed by the mistakes they make and the conditions in which they live.

\*\*\*

At a school like north Omaha's Kennedy Elementary, where nearly everyone qualifies for government-subsidized lunches, you wouldn't think that kids would be teased for being poor.

But **Cierra** knew all about it.

Back in fourth grade, she thought nobody at Kennedy liked her. And life wasn't great at home, either.

Her father had little to do with her. Her single mother often was overwhelmed by her four children, her own health problems and lack of money.

Michelle **Moten** felt that her children always had clean clothes and were well cared for. School officials and child welfare authorities had a different view. At times, the children were temporarily taken from the home.

In all, **Cierra** lived in five different homes from kindergarten through sixth grade. She switched schools often — three of the times, in the middle of the school year.

Not a family you'd expect to succeed, thought Pat Metoyer, who knew **Cierra** when she went to Metoyer's Simple Simon day care program.

But Metoyer and others saw something special in **Cierra**.

As a little girl, Kiki — as she was known by family members and close friends — recited her ABCs, tied her shoes and counted better than her peers. She memorized poems quickly.

And when she got to fourth grade at Kennedy, **Cierra** was known as the State Queen because she could name and identify all 50 states.

Aware of her living conditions and family challenges, her teachers brought her clothing, invited her to activities with their families, talked to her about the future: a high school diploma and even college.

But they couldn't change her home life or get rid of the big chip on her little shoulders. One spring day, one of the biggest boys in the class kicked her leg and she attacked him. It took two teachers to pull them apart.

**Cierra** was suspended for several days.

\*\*\*

Guidance and support can make a big difference to children like **Cierra**.

Some youths find teachers or family members who can help them succeed. Others benefit from more formal mentoring programs.

John Cavanaugh, who heads the Building Bright Futures initiative, said the Omaha community needs to ensure that more children find supportive relationships with adults.

"We want to double the number of mentors," he said.

Cavanaugh said his group is working on standards and programs to raise the number of children with mentors to 6,000.

Children also can gain guidance from the expanding roster of after-school programs funded by public and private grants.

Last fall, for example, OPS began assigning each ninth-grade athlete to an "academic coach." Each freshman meets with a coach, usually an athletic coach or another teacher, once a week after school to get homework help, study tips or a pep talk.

And if weekly grade reports don't show that students are getting their work done and passing tests, they don't get to play.

OPS Superintendent John Mackiel said the program is one of several ways the district and others are trying to provide an individualized safety net for students.

"You see it emerging more and more," he said.

Yet too many students continue to lack a support system.

\*\*\*

When **Cierra** reached North High School

in 2004, she was full of energy and ambition and attitude.

Motivation wasn't a problem. She had plenty of goals.

Be first in her family to earn a high school diploma. Go to college. Have a career or maybe several.

"My little go-getter," her mother always called her. **Cierra** liked it when her mother bragged about her.

At home, where money was always short, **Cierra** wrote poems, drew pictures, altered old clothing to look like something new.

When she earned a little money braiding hair, she offered to help pay family bills.

At school, **Cierra** could be a quick study.

But her grades had become mediocre and her attendance spotty.

Eighth gradewas soshaky— F's in English, for example, and at least 22 days of absences — that **Cierra** was one of about 75 incoming freshmen assigned to a new structured study period that North High started that year. Students could receive homework help from teachers and learn study skills while earning course credit.

**Cierra** received an F and a D in the two-semester program. But her other grades improved, and her absences dropped. She missed 11 days, mostly suspensions.

As a freshman, she fought with another student and was suspended for five days.

The following year, in March 2006, she threatened a school librarian during a dispute over wearing headphones. That time, she was expelled from North. She could have finished her sophomore year at an alternative school, but **Cierra** figured she'd have to attend every day yet would receive just one credit. She decided to start fresh at Bryan High in the fall.

Her mother told **Cierra** that blowing up won't solve everything.

**Cierra** took that message with her to Bryan. But her good behavior didn't even last until Labor Day. She caused a scene when school officials challenged her on a dress code violation, earning a two-day suspension. And a few days before Christmas, she argued furiously with her chemistry teacher.

Bryan officials suspended her for the final nine days of the semester. While **Cierra** viewed that as a miraculous reprieve, the combination of that suspension and her earlier expulsion left her four credits behind.

**Cierra** was so discouraged that she considered dropping out.

\*\*\*

OPS students have new opportunities to get themselves back on track, whether they derail for academic, behavioral or other reasons.

"What we do is try to go back and pick up the pieces," said Rachel Wise, an OPS administrator.

Individualized computer classes are now available at every OPS high school, allowing students to make up credits after school in a variety of courses.

And, in a change from the past, students don't always have to retake an entire course — just the part they failed.

Last year at Bryan High alone, students made up about 150 to 200 credits through the computer classes.

Wise said it's important that credit recovery efforts don't require students to forgo all elective courses as they try to make up the basics.

Often, she said, the hook for keeping students engaged in school is a special interest such as art or music. If a student who failed math is blocked from taking a music class she likes because her schedule is packed with makeup math, the school unwittingly may steer her to dropping out.

Summer classes can help students catch up on the basics without preventing them from taking other courses. Last year, about 1,600 high school students earned nearly 3,300 credits.

In addition, Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation is funding a newer program for freshmen who didn't earn enough credits to advance to 10th grade. Last summer, 409 were enrolled.

Students earned nearly 800 credits, enough to boost 180 students — 44 percent of the participants — to sophomore status.

Still, with nearly 1,000 OPS freshmen failing at least one course in just their first semester last year, there are plenty of students who continue to lag.

\*\*\*

Midway through her junior year, **Cierra** still had a chance at a high school diploma.

But she would have to work extra hard to catch up.

At first, she wondered if it was worth trying, and her attitude showed. Teachers worried that she

seemed uncharacteristically listless.

She started finding excuses to stay home from school, especially on Mondays, and missed 25 days in the second half of her junior year. That spring, she failed English and gym.

Students need 36 credits by the start of their senior year to stay on pace to graduate.

Most have more. **Cierra** had 32.

Michelle **Moten** tried, waking **Cierra** early so she wouldn't miss the bus. And her mother nagged **Cierra** if she stayed home.

At school, counselor Kathy McNally listened to **Cierra** express her frustrations and helped her design a plan to finish school.

With more than 300 students assigned to her, there was a limit to how much time McNally could devote to **Cierra**. She hoped it would be enough.

In her heart, **Cierra** didn't really want to drop out anyway.

She crammed her senior year with classes to earn the 17 credits she still needed. Her mood brightened as she realized that she had a chance to reach her goal. McNally noticed that she smiled more.

**Cierra** took one English class in the computer lab, staying late twice a week. As for chemistry, which she had failed to complete twice before, she aced the final exam: 50 out of 50.

In May 2008, she donned a green Bryan High gown and crossed the stage at Omaha's Civic Auditorium. When the diploma was in her hands, she smiled and waved it above her head.

**Cierra**'s mother, Michelle, wept tears of pride. She put the diploma on a shelf near the family television, close to the high school equivalency certificate earned by **Cierra**'s older brother while he was in prison.

\*\*\*

First-generation high school graduates like **Cierra** usually need more intensive guidance to move on to higher education than busy high school counselors can provide, said Ken Bird, former superintendent of the Westside Community Schools in Omaha.

That's the reason for a new program by the Bright Futures Foundation, created by the local businesspeople and philanthropists who are behind the similarly named Build-ing Bright Futures initiative. The two efforts aim to help low-income children from birth to career.

Bird, who is chief executive of the foundation, said the group wants to build on school guidance efforts by giving more hands-on help to low-income youths who are confused by the college admissions process or stymied by its requirements.

"There's no history of what to do in their families — or frankly, in their neighborhoods," Bird said. "When you don't know, that path and maze of getting from high school graduation into admission to college is just overwhelming."

For next year, 150 juniors and seniors from three high schools — Omaha Benson, Omaha Northwest and Ralston — have been selected for the foundation's "Avenue Scholars" program. All come from low-income families. Most have less than a B average.

In addition, the foundation will work with about 30 recent graduates who are ready to attend Metropolitan Community College.

Students will be assigned a "talent adviser" who can help them consider their education and career options, apply for college and financial aid, and resolve problems as they arise.

"We're all about helping them get everything from the system," Bird said.

\*\*\*

With high school behind her, **Cierra** really wanted to get out of north Omaha. The family lived in a beat-up rental house near Miller Park, and the closest neighbors were abandoned houses with broken windows and gang graffiti.

On the dilapidated front porch, young adults and teens routinely ignored Michelle **Moten**'s posted signs that "this is not the kick-it spot, so beat it."

Home, **Cierra** thought, had too much drama. College would be a way out.

But **Cierra** and her mother were unfamiliar with the college application and financial aid process, which can be tricky even for parents with college experience.

After searching online, **Cierra** settled on a cosmetology school associated with Lincoln College in Normal, Ill., where students can live in on-campus dorms. **Cierra** could start the yearlong program as early as mid-June.

**Cierra** jumped at the chance to leave town and be independent. She had never been farther than Kansas City's Worlds of Fun amusement park.

McNally, her counselor at Bryan, gently pointed out that the Illinois school would be more expensive than other options. But she didn't want to rain on **Cierra**'s dreams either.

**Cierra** knew the \$21,000 price tag meant she'd have to borrow thousands of dollars not covered by financial aid, but the specifics seemed murky and irrelevant. People told her she could take up to 15 years to pay off any loans, so she figured she'd be able to do that easily after she finished school and got a good job.

No one told her that getting a loan might be nearly impossible for a family with no income. **Cierra** and her mother had been so strapped for cash that they had trouble finding \$ 15 to pay fines at Bryan so **Cierra** could receive her diploma. And even after **Cierra** started a job at the nearby Sonic drive-in, they only mustered the \$275 in college fees and deposits with a \$200 gift from Miss Pat, her former day care provider.

Still, the school offered enough financial aid that **Cierra** could start school and finish the loan paperwork later, and the rest of the details came together quickly. Her mother had no car but found a friend who could provide a ride to Illinois. **Cierra** ignored the college's two- page suggested packing list—the computers and clothes hampers and cookie sheets — and took only what could fit in a few duffel bags.

The day she settled into her dorm room, she had \$35 in cash. Then she discovered that the college didn't provide her with meals, as she had thought. And then \$30 disappeared from her room, leaving her almost penniless and hungry.

Cheap noodles, a job at a local Arby's and tips from clients of the school's training salon took care of her meals. But **Cierra**'s biggest problem was that she had no way to pay the mounting balance on her college account. The loan applications she and her mother filled out were pending, pending, then rejected.

Owed more than \$2,000, the cosmetology school told her in November that she couldn't remain a student.

It was hard for **Cierra** to be optimistic when she first returned home. Her mother had moved to a better neighborhood, yet the smaller house was crowded with her own family and other relatives who needed a place to stay. **Cierra** couldn't find a job, couldn't get into school, couldn't even get a transcript from her Illinois school.

But things are starting to turn around. She enrolled at Metro, planning to study early childhood education.

When Bird learned of her situation from a reporter, he sent a Bright Futures Foundation staff member to help resolve problems.

Within days, with the foundation's help, **Cierra** was re-enrolled in a course she had dropped when she ran out of money for textbooks. Metro officials waived a financial aid deadline she had missed, giving her access to money for books and school supplies.

And **Cierra** was selected to be in the foundation's first group of Metro students. She'll have a laptop computer, live in an on-campus dorm, pay nothing in tuition and participate in a paid work-study program.

These days, **Cierra** has no regrets about going to Illinois, even though it didn't work out. It made her feel more independent.

Family members look at her differently, too. Some of them now are talking about college.

- Contact the writer: 444-1114, [paul.goodsell@owh.com](mailto:paul.goodsell@owh.com)



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

**Cierra Moten** leaves her north Omaha home last June to start cosmetology school in Illinois. In the background is her half sister Christine. Below, **Cierra** as a Kennedy Elementary fourth-grader in 2000 during a field trip to the Durham Museum and accompanied by teacher Libby Kermoade. The World-Herald tracked the graduation rates of **Cierra** and her Kennedy classmates.

---



KILEY CRUSE/THE WORLD-HERALD

Powered by [TECNAVIA](#)

Copyright (c) 2009 Omaha World-Herald 05/17/2009