

Schools for the Future helps Duval County students get back on schedule

The program pushes those behind in their grade level to catch up and earn a diploma.

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By [Topher Sanders](#)

Students in Lillie Graham's intensive reading class had a passionate conversation Monday about the lead character of the book "Thick."

The students, who are 13 or 14 and behind grade level, enthusiastically raised their hands to speak or sometimes jumped right into the discussion to express a point.

The apprehension created by lacking confidence or the embarrassment that can come from being older than their classmates is eliminated in Graham's classroom because they all face the same challenge.

The students attend Duval County Public Schools' new Schools for the Future alternative program, a partnership with The Bridge of Northeast Florida and several other nonprofit groups.

Check out [more images of the program](#)

The school has 93 students in the eighth and ninth grades that are all two or more years behind grade level. The pilot program aims to help the students catch up in four to five years to earn their diploma and be ready for college or the workforce.

The program cost about \$1.7 million, with more than \$770,000 coming from private donations. Most of the district's cost is in personnel, which Principal Michelle Joseph notes is funding that follows the students no matter where they are.

Schools for the Future replaces the unsuccessful Renaissance Academy, which wasn't getting the results the district wanted and was down to about 40 students. Students who did manage to make gains in the Renaissance Academy would lose those gains once they moved up to high school and back into traditional classrooms.

Of the district's nearly 18,000 over-age students, about 15,000 are in middle or high school. Duval's intervention efforts at the secondary level prioritize about 3,800 students who are two or more years behind.

The pilot program features small classes, longer school days, frequent counseling for students and access to the latest technology. The program is partly based on the Diploma Plus alternative high school model that operates in eight states. The program will be measured on whether it can help students catch up, stay caught up and graduate with a diploma.

Carolyn Speed pulled her son Marcus Glover out of a private school for the opportunity to attend the alternative program.

"This school provides wonderful opportunity for the students," Speed said. "The only way that you fail in this school is if you don't show up."

Marcus was falling behind in his former school, Speed said, but in Schools for the Future he's being challenged, is assigned more homework and has an opportunity to be a leader. He was one of a couple of dozen students to receive a perfect progress report at the school.

Back in Graham's class, the students' reading level is somewhere between the fourth and sixth grade.

Graham reads aloud and lets her students discuss and write about what they've heard.

"We always want kids who are learning to read to hear good reading," said Michelle Joseph, the school's principal.

Joseph said the conversations and writing exercises help to build the students' confidence in expressing and writing their thoughts down. The instructors will later focus on organization and structure.

The alternative school students won't receive a school grade, but Joseph said the students will need to show about 10 percent incremental growth a year to catch up.

Quemeishai Clover, 14, said she appreciates the approach and believes the school is helping her.

"Dividing different kids into groups so they can get better at what they need to do," Quemeishai said. "Since we're facing the same challenges, you can help me and I help you."

This level of attention doesn't come cheap. The program cost about \$1.7 million, with more than \$770,000 coming from private donations. Most of the district's cost is in personnel, which Joseph notes is funding that follows the students no matter where they are.

Down the hall on Monday, Daniel Quinones, 15, researched historical figures connected to Jacksonville for his English class. The students used tablet

computers to do their research and helped their peers by posting important facts about Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bob Hayes or Henry Morrison Flagler on a white board.

Daniel, who is one of the school's technology interns, helped a few of his classmates troubleshoot issues with their tablet in the middle of his research.

"My old school just gave us paperwork and told us to do it," he said. "But at this school I'm learning how to do details, do settings, stuff like that."

Quemeishai said she's already learning some deeper lessons from the school.

"If you ever have a downfall, you can always pick yourself back up," she said. "You don't ever have to let someone tell you what you can be and what you cannot be."

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