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SCHOOLS A STEP UP, ONWARD, CLOSER TO SUCCESS

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Illustration: Photo - by Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian

For Gielle Armstrong, the day at Portsmouth Middle School isn't over when the bell rings at 3:50 p.m. He and 35 other students in the North Portland school have two more hours to go in their quest to be ready for high school -- just around the corner for these eighth-graders.

Armstrong, tall and lanky with cornrows and a wispy moustache, spends four afternoons a week in Step Up, a program designed to give middle school students a helping hand as they make the tricky transition to high school. Needing some help with school, the 14-year-old Armstrong sought out Michael Navarro, the Portsmouth Step Up coordinator, and joined the tutoring and mentoring program in March. Other Step Up kids are recommended by teachers, or sent by parents, or recruited by the staff. But all are there because somebody thought they might have trouble adapting to high school.

The concern is real: About 40 percent of students who drop out in high school drop out in their freshman year.

Step Up's middle school program operates at Portsmouth, George Middle School and the alternative Open Meadow Middle School, which feed into Roosevelt High School. The middle school program is in its first year. A program for high school freshmen has operated at Roosevelt for two years, with impressive results.

All 37 Step Up students who went through the summer academy and full-year program the first year completed their freshman year. All Step Up students, whether in the summer academy or not, made academic gains at twice or more the rate of other Roosevelt freshmen. Staff say this year's students are continuing the pattern -- better grades and higher attendance.

Gielle (Jie-ELLE) Armstrong isn't interested in statistics. He is interested in bettering his academic record at Portsmouth and making a mark in high school, when he gets there. He wants to go to college on a basketball scholarship.

"When I am here, I focus," Armstrong says about the study periods. "Sometimes when I go home, I just turn on the TV or my Playstation."

Since joining Step Up, Armstrong says, his grades on class work have moved from F's and D's to C's and even a B or two.

Step Up students get tutoring in English and math plus counseling on personal responsibility, making smart decisions, and organizing themselves and their school work. Each Step Up counselor, or advocate, works with 12 students. Step Up is run by Open Meadow, a 33-year-old youth education organization. Building a strong relationship between counselors and the young people they work with is critical.

Armstrong and Da'Love Woods, his advocate, share a love of basketball. Armstrong plays center on a church-sponsored team, and Woods played varsity in college and conducts summer basketball clinics. On sunny days, when there's down time, she and Armstrong shoot hoops on the Portsmouth playground. Woods, a full-time graduate student at Portland State, says Armstrong quickly became a leader.

"When he first came in here, he was very quiet," she says. "But now he connects well with everybody in the group."

Armstrong, for his part, finds Woods a valuable mentor as he heads toward high school.

"She treats me like an adult," he says.

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