

today @ UWM

Success is the only option

by Kathy Quirk

Photos by Brian Slawson



Getting students to see college in their future is part of Finch's work. Here he poses with a group attending College for Teens.

Darrell Finch is leading an education program that's achieved a nearly 100 percent high-school graduation rate among young people living in Milwaukee's Highland Homes public housing.

Combining personal experience and a knack for community organizing with what he's learned in UW-Milwaukee's Educational Policy and Community Studies program, Finch is an education specialist for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee (HACM), working with nearly 400 children.

The Education Initiative he leads for HACM is designed to help parents help their children complete high school and succeed even beyond that achievement.

And it's working. In 2008 and 2009, 100 percent of the students in the program, who attend a mix of public, charter and voucher schools, graduated from high school. (According to the most recent Milwaukee Public Schools District Report Card, the graduation rate for African American students was 64 percent in 2008-09, although it is trending up). Fifty-five percent of HACM's Education Initiative grads went on to college in 2009.



Darrell Finch is education specialist for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, working with families who live in Highland Homes in background.

Finch, a UWM senior, is a determined and persistent mentor. Eighty-six percent of his Class of 2011 students graduated. Of the three who did not, two attend summer school and the remaining student has joined Job Corps. Not one student in the last five years has dropped out of the program.

School, sports, life

Before joining the newly formed Education Initiative, Finch was working as a public safety officer for the housing authority. He wanted to reach out to young people *before* they got into trouble, and started a sports program with a bit of education built in. Eventually, the Milwaukee Brewers and Bucks and a variety of community groups got involved. “It wasn’t just basketball, it was the skills of living,” says Finch.

The housing authority launched the Education Initiative in 2005 when old public housing in the area was demolished and replaced with a mix of single-family homes and tidy brick multifamily dwellings, surrounded by green lawns and brightly colored summer flowers.

“Tony Perez [secretary-executive director of HACM] wanted to make sure we were investing in more than homes,” says Finch. HACM officials saw in Finch someone passionate about education and already volunteering to work with young people through the basketball program. “I always tell the kids even volunteer work can pay off,” Finch says with a smile.

Parent power

The program is simple. Residents accepted into Highland Homes public housing must enroll their child (ren) in the program and work with Finch, his staff and case managers.

Parents are a key part of the program. Finch asks them to bring their child’s records and schoolwork to the first meeting, and makes sure they have a folder to keep all the papers together for subsequent meetings. “We develop a plan and set goals and objectives,” he says.

Some of these parents are working two jobs or are single parents raising children. Taking the 20-30 minutes to meet with him is a big commitment for them, but is critical to the program’s success. “It’s not just the work I do; it’s the work the parents are doing with the kids.”

Video by Mary Rinzel
Darrell Finch describes why his program works, why his work is his passion, and why he returned to UWM to better himself and the kids he is determined to see graduate. [View full size on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnsI8uNWkDQ&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnsI8uNWkDQ&feature=player_embedded)

The Education Initiative offers a variety of programs to support family and school efforts including preschool, after-school help, a summer reading program, social and professional etiquette classes, an annual spelling bee and student recognition awards. Finch also helps families link up with community resources like Community Learning Centers in MPS and precollege programs at UWM. If a student's grades fall, Finch schedules a meeting with the family to see what needs to be done to get the student back on track.



Students and families use the computer lab that is part of education facilities at Highland Homes.

Making sure the students attend classes is vital. Most schools are working hard to educate these students, says Finch, "but they can't succeed if the student doesn't show up." The HACM program also focuses on getting the students engaged in their education.

Motivation in common

Finch is passionate about getting students thinking about their future, not always an easy task with teens or preteens who'd rather be hanging around or playing video games.

Having grown up in public housing and once been an indifferent student himself, Finch knows all about the challenges and the excuses. "So, you're living in poverty," he tells them. "Others who live in poverty are excelling."

The key, he says, is helping the students find something they want to do and figure out how they're going to achieve that goal. "We want to start a trend where graduating from school is the norm."

The Education Initiative has had unexpected dividends. As families get more involved with their children's education, some, including a mother of 10 who earned a college degree, have returned to school themselves.



As part of the Education Initiative, Finch brings students to programs like UWM's summer College for Teens. Here students take part in a Spanish class.

Finch, who majored in education at Colorado's Adams State College but didn't finish his teaching certification, decided to work on his degree in Educational Policy and Community Studies several years ago. He is proud of his 3.8 average, and plans to pursue master's and doctoral degrees.

He follows the same advice he offers to the young people in the program: "Once you've got a passion for what you're doing, you want to be the best at it."