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In Philadelphia, Few Students Are on the Path to College



Jamel Haggins, 20, made the leap from being the 2009 class valedictorian at Benjamin Franklin High School in Philadelphia to studying architecture at Lehigh University. His former principal at Franklin calls him "the Michael Jordan of students."
—Jessica Kourkounis for the Notebook/NewsWorks

By Benjamin Herold, *Philadelphia Public Schools Notebook/NewsWorks*

Strolling across Lehigh University's picturesque campus, Jamel Haggins is a striking example of the best that Philadelphia's neighborhood high schools have to offer.

Now a 20-year-old college junior, Haggins is on track to earn his architecture degree next spring. A chiseled 6'3" tall and 255 pounds, he's also an all-conference tight end for Lehigh's football team. Sporting an easy smile and a bright red fraternity sweatshirt—he's the president of the campus chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi—the proud North Philly native is a magnet for attention from students and staff alike.

"He's my everything," gushes Haggins' girlfriend, Allison Morrow, the president of Lehigh's Black Student Union.

Haggins was the crown jewel of the class of 2009 at North Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin High: class valedictorian, a three-time all-Public League football star, and a commanding officer in the school's Navy Junior ROTC.

His former principal calls him "the Michael Jordan of students"—someone to be admired, but clearly in a league of his own.

"He's just different," says principal Christopher Johnson.

Different, most tellingly, because his postsecondary success has not been widely shared by his classmates.

Of the 145 students who started 9th grade at Franklin in fall 2005, only 17 enrolled in a

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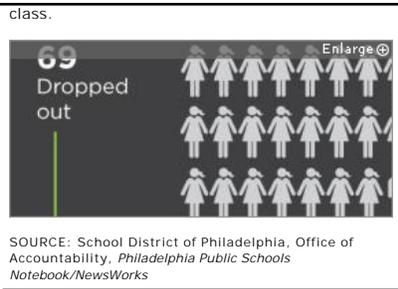
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four-year college, according to new National Student Clearinghouse data provided to the *Notebook* by the School District.

Citywide, only 25 percent of students who started 9th grade in one of Philadelphia's neighborhood high schools that year have enrolled in any postsecondary education, compared to almost 80 percent of students who started at the city's most selective magnet high schools.



"It's unacceptable," said Lori Shorr, the city's chief education officer.

Mired in deep financial crisis, School District officials are trying to expand educational quality by opening up more seats in top-performing schools.

It sounds logical.

But Johnson is skeptical.

Even a neighborhood school like Franklin can help the Jamels of the world get to college, says Johnson.

If the city's education leaders really want to fix Philadelphia's broken pipeline to college, it's the kids who can't get into the magnets they should be worrying about.

It's Friday evening, and Lydell Boanes is getting high.

On music.

"Drumming is like my drug," says a sweat-soaked Boanes, his four-piece quad still strapped to his massive frame after practice with West Philadelphia's Showtime drill team.

"That's what I love to do."

Also a member of Benjamin Franklin High's class of 2009, Boanes, 22, plays and volunteers with Showtime while working part-time as a security guard.



He was hoping to be an electrician by now.

After graduating from high school, Boanes went to Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology in Lancaster. But he was there for only two weeks before learning that his father—absent in his early years, but with whom he built a strong relationship later—was terminally ill. Boanes left school that day.

Lydell Boanes, 22, earned a certificate from Thompson Institute but can't find work as an electrician. He's volunteering with a drill team and working as a security guard.
—Jessica Kourkounis for the Notebook/NewsWorks

Later, he enrolled at Thompson Institute, where he earned an electrician's certificate.

But other than \$16,000 in student loan debt, says Boanes, he doesn't have much to show for his postsecondary experience.

The credential "carries a lot of weight for me personally," he says. "But I haven't seen any results yet."

Nevertheless, Boanes, who grew up in a violent, desperately poor neighborhood in West Philadelphia nicknamed "The Bottom," counts himself as a success story.

While his father wrestled with addiction, Boanes spent five years in foster care.

In 6th grade, he got caught bringing a gun to Belmont Elementary School.

He started 9th grade at University City High, but was transferred to Franklin after getting into a fight a few weeks into the school year.

Boanes says his biggest problem was that he didn't believe in himself.

"I thought I was, like, a stupid kid," he says. "I couldn't read that good, and everything that I did, I failed."

Once at Franklin, he fell behind in his classes almost immediately, failing both English and

math.

But sitting in summer school after 9th grade, something clicked.

The staff at Franklin took notice.

Inside the school's Student Success Center, a large basement room filled with computers and couches, Boanes found sympathetic adults eager to help him with everything from math homework to college paperwork.

Inside principal Johnson's office, he found another father figure.

"He always stayed on top of knuckleheads," says Boanes.

"He didn't want nobody to fail."

Christopher Johnson wants to be very clear about something:

He's never written a kid off.

"Regardless of what you come through these doors with, regardless of who your parents are, regardless of where you were yesterday, the expectation is that you're going to go to college," he says pointedly.

But Johnson also says it's no secret why Philadelphia's broken college pipeline is largely a neighborhood high school problem.

"Schools are good at the end of the day because of the type of children that go there," he says.

"The children that get removed from charter schools, from magnet schools, from incarceration, they have to go to some school, so they go to neighborhood high schools."

Franklin has done better than most. Since 2008, the school has seen a more than 50 percent increase in the number of its graduates who go straight to college.

District officials say Franklin has done a good job at building a strong "college-going culture," citing especially the school's Student Success Center, which became a model for other neighborhood high schools across the city.

They also praise Johnson's leadership.

"He connects with students, he cares about students, he encourages students," said Fran Newberg, deputy for accountability and technology for the District.

"That can move mountains."

Still, for most of the 145 kids who started 9th grade at Franklin in 2005, the pipeline to college fell apart before it even got started.

Seventy-two earned a high school diploma.

Seventy-three have not.

Now 20 years old, Ayanna Roney is rushing to get to school.

She's back at Benjamin Franklin High.

Three years after failing to graduate with the rest of Franklin's class of '09, Roney is still trying to make up the three classes she needs to earn her diploma. Her latest effort has taken her back to her old school, where the District runs one of its night school programs for over-age and under-credited students.

"My high school diploma is not my last stop. I want to get that out of the way so I can go to college," says Roney.

First, though, she must wrestle her 2½-year-old son, Kaimir, into his clothing.

"It's him that's gonna slow it up," she says, laughing as her son avoids her attempts to put his pants on.

Roney's career at Franklin started smoothly.



Ayanna Roney, 20, hopes to attend Wilson College, a liberal arts school for women in Chambersburg, Pa., where she could live on campus with her son. First, she must earn her

Like Boanes, she was a Success Center

regular. During daily afterschool visits as an 11th grader, she hatched a plan to go to college to study theater and communications.

But during her senior year, things fell apart abruptly.

"I started hanging around a couple of new people," she says, "and they brought drama with them."

After taking part in a major brawl, Roney was suspended. Her grades slipped. She started cutting more classes.

"It was like quicksand," she says.

At the end of 12th grade, Roney found out that the hodgepodge of credits she had accumulated wasn't enough to graduate on time.

She started summer school, then found out she was pregnant.

She re-enrolled at Fels High, but was derailed when her son was born three months prematurely, requiring extended intensive care.

"I just wanted him to be OK," said Roney. "Everything else was, 'I'll get to it.'"

Later attempts to get into a GED program and the alternative-pathway programs YouthBuild and Gateway to College didn't work out.

It wasn't until Roney placed a call to principal Johnson—three years later, she still had his cell phone number—that she found an opportunity that stuck.

Each day, she makes the 90-minute commute to and from Franklin, including stops to drop off Kaimir in the afternoon and pick him up at night.

"Now that he's a little bit older, it's getting a little easier," she says.

With District leaders juggling a budget crisis, a bureaucratic restructuring, an academic reorganization, and a leadership transition, it's tough to tell exactly what the plan is to help more kids like Ayanna Roney make it to—and through—college.

In April, officials announced that 11 selective high schools across the city would collectively expand their enrollment by 1,700 students.

The policy could have made a difference for Jamel Haggins, who was accepted at prestigious Central High, but declined in favor of a scholarship offer from Roman Catholic High that fell through at the last minute.

It likely would not have helped less stellar students such as Lydell Boanes and Ayanna Roney.

"In the short term, what we can do to help kids is to get them into schools that will be the best places for them," said Naomi Houseman, the District's co-deputy chief in the Office of Counseling and Promotion Standards.

Long term, however, she acknowledges that the strategy might not be the best thing for the school system as a whole.

Plans to provide that kind of holistic support are murky, at best.

Officials say they have hopes that the academic reorganization just getting underway might lead to better-prepared 9th graders down the line—but details have been non-existent.

Principals are being granted more autonomy to figure out their own solutions—at the same time their budgets have been dramatically slashed.

The external funding that has been supporting the city's [GEAR-UP](#) programs and [Student Success Centers](#) could soon dry up.

In the meantime, then, it's more "high-performing seats."

Shorr dismisses out of hand any concerns that existing disparities among the District's high schools might get worse.

"I don't think we could be more stratified than we are right now," she says.

Back at Lehigh University, Jamel Haggins is getting anxious.

Alone inside a computer lab, he's preparing for a critique with his prickly architecture professor.

"It's always nerve-wracking," he says. "It seems like nothing is ever going to be good enough for him."

Appearances aside, it's not like his time at Lehigh has been a breeze, says Haggins.

On his first big exam, he scored 19 out of 100: "Chemistry just demolished me."

There was also dealing with the culture shock from being around White people his age for the first time: "I never had a class with one before college."

Even on the football field, he didn't know what he didn't know until he got to Lehigh:

"In high school, we didn't even have a playbook," says Haggins, incredulous.

For a while, always feeling like he was starting at the back of the race made him angry.

But Haggins, born to a teenage mother in a violent section of North Philly, has always had an uncanny knack for bouncing back quickly.

Even he's not sure how to explain it.

"You just have to let stuff go sometimes and keep moving forward," he finally offers.

As his architecture professor lays into him for being behind in his preparations for an upcoming presentation, Haggins does just that.

"I learned to convert it into a positive," he explains after class.

"I was like, 'OK, even though this dude is bashing my work, I'm going to take his criticism and apply it.'"

It's that kind of thing that makes his former principal shake his head and smile ruefully.

Students like Lydell Boanes and Ayanna Roney don't lack for talent or heart, says Christopher Johnson, but getting them through college often means everything needs to break just right.

But Haggins?

"He [will] do well in whatever environment he's in," says Christopher Johnson.

"He's just that kind of kid."



Benjamin Herold is a reporter for the Notebook and WHYY's NewsWorks.

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