

February 5, 2004 Thursday
SPORTS FINAL EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. 37

LENGTH: 615 words

HEADLINE: HARLEM SCHOOL TEACHES US HOW TO RECLAIM KIDS

BYLINE: BY STANLEY CROUCH

BODY:

There was a big celebration this week as the Thurgood Marshall Academy moved from 135th St. and St. Nicholas Ave. into its new home, on 135th St. and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd. - a site that had once been a **Harlem** landmark, Small's Paradise.

The move was an event that deserved celebrating. The **school** - the full name is the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change - provides a powerful rejoinder to the narrow conceptions of identity that have polluted the minds of many young people through popular entertainment and the limited visions of life that arrive from the streetcorners of our nation.

We see all around us the alarming impact of that garbage. We see the kids who have so little command of the English language that they speak as though slavery just ended, as the black writer Hugh Pearson recently observed.

Most of all, from their rude behavior, their crudeness and the look in their eyes that tells how few options they can imagine for themselves, we see the results of the deterioration of public education and the collapse of community responsibility for children.

The Thurgood Marshall Academy emphasizes a level of discipline that is not a mask for hatred of young people. Its teachers have the missionary zeal that these children need. Ninety percent of the students go on to higher education.

During my visit there, I observed that the students are well-spoken and that the dress code they follow gives them a sense that they are at work, not play. They have a job, just as their teachers have a job. They are there to learn and become civilized by absorbing the best that our civilization has to offer.

This does not mean that they are forced to become 400 black, brown, beige and bone robots. Not at all. They are still a vital, playful and sometimes unruly gathering of adolescents. But they have something that one always sees in the eyes of kids who are paid attention to, who are pushed, who are encouraged to dream, who are

expected to work hard and do well.

The students at the academy, which goes from seventh to 12th grade, have the look of young people who had been introduced to options, to thoughts about themselves beyond succeeding as rappers or athletes or living in the bling-bling of party girls. They do not have the dull or hostile or intimidated looks of children who have not been prepared to shape their fates within the possibilities of our nation.

At an assembly before lunch, where some kids did not want to calm down completely, the academy's principal, Sandye Poitier-Johnson, came to the microphone. There was an immediate change. When she asked for silence, she got it. Everyone came to attention.

Johnson explained to the kids that there would be no writing on the walls or the lockers and no trash dropped on the floor. She said that anyone who was not in his or her seat at the start of a class would not be allowed in. This new **school** would remain clean and good-looking, and all the students there would do the best they could at whatever they were doing.

There could be no better celebration of the importance of public education than the Thurgood Marshall Academy, which provides not only an education, but medical, dental and counseling services for the students and their parents, and glasses for kids who need them.

This full-court-press approach reflects the futuristic vision of the Rev. Calvin Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, as well as the goals of Mayor Bloomberg and **Schools** Chancellor Joel Klein.

There should be no doubt that the academy can provide a model for public education in this city and perhaps this nation. When things get serious, this is how they're done in New York.