

COVER STORY

HANDS-ON NURSING PROGRAM MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN SCHOOL

BY KEISA SHARPE-JEFFERSON
The Birmingham Times

Maria Manuel, a ninth-grade student at Huffman High School, wants to be an ultrasound technician. “The most interesting thing I learned in this program is about the diet, what people are not supposed to eat, what they can eat, and what’s not healthy for them,” Manuel said.

Jasmyne Miles, also a ninth grader at Huffman, really enjoys the “hands-on” aspect of learning about nursing and literally lit up as she explained why she wants to be a pediatric nurse.

“I realized that I found more pleasure in taking care of younger kids, and I was like, ‘Oh my God, I have to take up health care,’” Miles said. “I’m like, ‘This is something that’s really for me,’ and it was such a passion.”

Manuel and Miles are just a few of the students in Huffman High School’s Academy of Health Science magnet program who are learning the nursing industry with exposure to hands-on, professional experience.

And that, said Birmingham City Schools (BCS) Superintendent Mark Sullivan, Ed.D., will prove invaluable to the “diverse group of students” enrolled in the program.

“One of things we know in the health care field is that people feel more comfortable around those they can relate to, [and] oftentimes African Americans and Latinos don’t really have representation in their nurses and doctors,” Sullivan told The Birmingham Times.

“This [program] is building out a pipeline for young African American and Latino boys and girls who can be in the health care field and have jobs that can really transform their lives.”

FORGING A PATH

The Pathway to Professional Nursing program, which launched in the fall of 2023 at Huffman High School, is designed to prepare students for post-secondary education.

The program, in its first year at Huffman High School and being offered to ninth graders, will be “expanding next year to include Woodlawn, Wenonah, and Ramsey



From left: Huffman High nursing students Asya Jones-Boykin; Maria Manuel; Gwendolyn Bonner and An'Carliyah Campbell care for patient inside the school's Academy of Health Science. (AMARR CROSKY, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM TIMES)

high schools,” said Sullivan, adding that this is key for students because “they will have credentials and also a leg up when they graduate.”

Previously, the nursing program worked with students in grades 10 through 12.

The program goes beyond nursing, said Crystal Freeman, Doctor of Nursing Practice (D.N.P.), who is the Health Science Instructor at Huffman High School.

“Health Sciences is the broad name in terms of what students can pursue in career pathways, so we’re not just focusing only on nursing,” said Freeman.

“There are students who truly have interest in other careers related to

health care, but many of the students—particularly the female students — only want to learn more about nursing. So many of the skills overlap, regardless of what career pathway they choose,” said Freeman, who earned her D.N.P. degree from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) in 2009.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

UAB is a key partner in providing this educational foundation, and Huffman High School was an ideal choice for the program because it had an existing designation as an Academy of Health Science, complete with readily accessible resources, such as a health care skills lab with a nursing station and manikins. The program is current-

ly managed and co-directed by UAB School of Nursing Instructor Allyson Sanders, a Registered Nurse (R.N.) who works directly with the students at Huffman.

Students are not only investing in their future education but also creating more opportunities to secure a job in a vital profession, she said.

“The plan is to build a pathway from the high school straight to the university, and the goal is to increase diversity within the nursing workforce,” said Sanders. “The plan is also to engage students at an early age in nursing ... [and] Health Sciences in general. We do a lot of the foundational

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