Cleveland student's success is proof that the city's schools can work: Regina Brett

By Regina Brett, The Plain Dealer
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When the big poster tube arrived in the mail just before Christmas, the high school senior couldn't figure out what it was.

She opened it up and confetti fell out along with a congratulations sign and a letter welcoming her into the MIT Class of 2014.

"I got in! I got in!" she started screaming.

Wilhemina Koomson is living proof that kids in the Cleveland public schools can study their way into the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ever since I wrote that we should support CEO Eugene Sanders' bold plan to revamp Cleveland public schools, people keep challenging me, "Do you really believe his plan can work?"

Wilhemina is proof. She lives on Cleveland's West Side and is a product of Cleveland public schools. She plans on getting her M.D./Ph.D. degree in neuroscience. She has the brains to be an expert on brains.

"I have a lot of school ahead of me. I love learning," she told me.

She graduates this year. She's 16.

Sixteen?

"Yeah, I skipped eighth grade," she said.

Wilhemina attends the old John Hay High School that was transformed by your tax dollars into an innovation school called the Cleveland School of Science and Medicine. It is preparing the next generation of doctors, nurses and scientists.

The school has three key direct partners: Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals. Medical students from CWRU come to the high school every Wednesday at 3:30 p.m. to help prepare the kids for college entrance exams, lab work and go over tough courses like physics and calculus.

Wilhemina is in the first graduating class of the school, which opened four years ago. It gives students the option to study clinical medical care, scientific research and the business of health care.

What makes it work? The school runs four extra weeks a year, making for a 200-day school year. It also has an extended day, with students attending an extra hour every day. It can hire teachers without considering seniority. Kids have to pass a test to get in. The school dress code? Lab coats.
"We want to be the St. Ignatius of the East Side," said Principal Ed Weber.

He said the school has sent staff to St. Ignatius High School to study how to replicate everything from its guidance counselors to its powerful alumni network. Weber has been in public education 22 years and said, "These last four have been the thrill of a lifetime."

Most of his 350 students live in the same neighborhoods you read about in the newspaper where troubled youth are surrounded by drugs, guns and gangs. Some of his students have parents with drug problems. At least four were left homeless by parents who abandoned them. Some kids won't bring their parents to school because they're too embarrassed. Others have two parents who work hard and stay involved.

No matter what, the students show up. Weber expects other seniors to get into Dartmouth, Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, Bates, Temple and Purdue. Wilhemina is one of the first to get her acceptance letter.

The principal calls her a gem. Wilhemina takes classes at Cuyahoga Community College and at CWRU. Last summer she spent six weeks at MIT's Engineering and Science program. Wilhemina has three brothers. Two are in public school; one attends St. Ignatius. Wilhemina had been accepted at Hathaway Brown.

"She chose us over them," Weber said. "Her parents took a risk. They said we prepared their daughter as well as Ignatius prepared their son."

The school requires community service to build character, so Wilhemina worked with Alzheimer's patients at a nursing home. She's seen live surgeries and worked on research at CWRU.

Four years ago, her school was an experiment. It's now a success.

It's proof we can transform Cleveland's public schools, building by building, child by child.

How can we not?

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