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Gates Foundation scholarships brighten future for 1,000 teenagers

The grants are meant to improve odds for low-income students

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Trisha Johnson was all set to join the Air Force this summer after graduating from Harry S. Truman High School in Federal Way. She didn't really want to join the military, but she needed money for college.

Now, she's skipping the military and heading straight to Tacoma Community College as one of the first 1,000 recipients of the "Washington State Achievers" scholarships funded through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Students from 16 state high schools were eligible for the unusual scholarships, which some education experts say are part of an initiative that will alter individual state schools -- and, if it becomes a model for others, could improve the odds of success for low-income families everywhere.

Earlier this year, 16 schools learned that they had received "Achievers" grants aimed at redesigning their schools into smaller, more personalized environments meant to reach every student.

To qualify, at least 20 percent of students needed to be eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, a standard measure of poverty, and the school had to establish programs to encourage and prepare all students to attend college.

Yesterday, the second part of the grants came through: 1,000 juniors and seniors from the schools received college scholarships of up to \$6,400 per year for four years through the foundation and the non-profit Washington Education Foundation.

For many, students and counselors said yesterday, it was the "make or break" difference that allowed them to attend college. For others, it will let them graduate debt-free, allowing them to consider jobs that might fill a need in their communities and lives but not pay enough to tackle student loans.



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Meryl Schenker / P-I

Gates Foundation co-Chairman Bill Gates Sr. cheers remarks by Luke Atay of Skamania County, second from right, one of 1,000 students from the state to receive Achievers scholarships. Two other scholarship winners are Seth Sather, far left, of Spokane and Monica Prado of Yakima.

The recipients are "students who have overcome challenges, who have persevered, who are leaders in their schools and communities, and, for most of whom, college seemed an unattainable goal," said Bill Gates Sr., father of the Microsoft co-founder and co-chairman of the Gates Foundation.

Mariner High School senior Melissa Mowry, for example, wants to become a teacher, because her own teachers have made such a difference in her life. Mowry, a student journalist who also participates in dance, drama and music, said she also wants to be a foster parent, hoping to improve a foster care system that she has been a part of herself (she now lives with an older sister).

"I have a lot of goals and dreams," she said, and some didn't seem possible if she was saddled with loans.

The scholarship program is unusual in several ways. First, it combines funding for a specific high school reform agenda with money for students to succeed in college. It also means a single private foundation is now directly assisting large parts of the student body at given schools: At Cleveland High School in Seattle, for example, 30 out of 112 graduating seniors received the scholarship.

Although Cleveland is now one of the least popular school choices for Seattle students, the inside line its students now have on plum scholarships -- along with the required in-school reforms -- will likely make it more desirable.

Unlike most such grants, the Achiever scholarships don't require high grade point averages. Barbara Zettel, financial aid administrator for Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, was one of the administrators reviewing applications for the Achievement Scholars. She said it took an entirely different approach from what she's used to -- she had to focus on students' heart and drive and potential instead of their transcripts.

Trisha Johnson had to leave high school a few times to help her family financially, stepping up her work schedule from part time to full time when needed. But she always knew she wanted to become an attorney, and she's hoping to study family law and help abused women.

The scholarships will be granted for 10 years -- they were given to both juniors and seniors this year, but will be just for juniors in the future.

An applicant needed to be a student at one of the 16 designated schools; to have a family income that was 75 percent or less of the state's median family income; to plan on at least a four-year degree; and to enroll at a state college or university (private or public) for at least the first two years of college.

The last requirement is there, foundation officials said, because students are at the highest risk of dropping out in their first two years, and the foundation wanted to provide them

with mentors and keep them in schools that had all agreed to provide support to help Achiever recipients stay in school.

Joni Finney, vice president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, found the idea fascinating.

"They're addressing areas that could significantly increase participation (by low-income students) -- preparation and affordability."

Trisha's mother, Annette Goode, said her 11-year-old son is now talking about how he's going to go to college in 2008 and become a computer engineer. Trisha's success has shown the whole family, she said, that being poor doesn't mean you can't get a college education.

"I guess they're breaking the cycle," she said.

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