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## CCC guides teens toward construction industry careers, 100 openings for upcoming school year

By *Dionne D. Peoples* Of The St. Louis American

Dwight Sloan, 21, landed his dream job of operating heavy construction equipment because he attended Construction Careers Center (CCC), a nine-year-old charter high school in South St. Louis that teaches youth about in the construction industry.

Gabriel "Gabby" Fields, 19, has a scholarship to Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, an internship each year and a guaranteed job at S.M. Wilson and Co. upon graduation because she attended CCC.

And Serenity Breedland, 17, graduated this year as class valedictorian and is working for St. Louis City as an engineering technician trainee because she attended CCC.

Though they graduated in different classes, several CCC graduates agree that the networking that occurs at the school and the school's curriculum contributed to their success. "People in the construction field come in and they mentor us and they are involved with the school," said Fields, who received a scholarship from S.M. Wilson and Co. where she is a project engineer intern.

At the school, they also learn to give their all. "If anything is given to me and the door is opened, I will shine because I will do my best," Fields said.

Sloan has the same attitude. That's how he got his job. He was networking with a contractor at the school who was creating the school's track and Sloan asked if he could help. "I networked and got a chance to prove myself," Sloan said. Sloan is now in the union (International Union of Operating Engineers Local 513) with the man he had helped that year.

Their work ethic is no coincidence, school officials say.

"We teach them that you have to earn everything you get every single day," said Terry Nelson, who has been on the board since the school was formed in 2000. "Our job is to guide and mold them and let them know there are great successes out there if they are willing to work for it. We are preparing them for a career, not just a job."

As the accredited high school prepares for the upcoming school year, it has 100 spaces still available for students, especially ninth graders. Classes begin August 17. Officials say they are not filled to capacity simply because the community doesn't know the school's story.

"There is a huge segment of the population that doesn't know the benefits they can reap," said Gina Washington, principal at CCC. According to districtwide MAP scores, CCC scored the fourth highest of 13 St. Louis public high schools in advanced math, outperforming all regular high schools and four magnet schools. The school is 98 percent African American and 80 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged.

The mission of the school, whose annual budget is \$3 million, is to prepare students for the future by providing an excellent foundation in academics, broad exposure to the construction industry and career and technical education preparation.

A personal interview is a required part of the admissions process. The school operates on a 200-day school year and students are promoted based on their academic achievement.

A contract among the parents, students and school includes strict codes of conduct and attendance. All students are tested for substance abuse, wear uniforms and participate in community service-learning opportunities.

'Fulfilling a need'

The Associated General Contractors of St. Louis and the St. Louis construction industry founded the school in 2000 as a way to attract more African Americans to careers in construction, said Scott Wilson, AGC chairman. "It was a simple idea," Wilson said. "A number of contractors bellied up to the bar and took money out of their pocket to build the school." It cost about \$6 million to renovate the school, located at 1224 Grattan St.

And since then, graduates such as Sloan are working in the construction field and Gabby Fields and Serenity Breedland are making preparation for their full time jobs in the construction industry. Fields is majoring in construction management and will have the opportunity



to work for Wilson's company, S.M. Wilson & Co. upon graduation. Breedland plans to major in civil engineering. "That is a dream fulfilled," Wilson said. "I'd like to do that 100 times over. Wouldn't that be great?"

He said the school must do a better job in telling their story because of competition from other charter schools though none is like CCC.

Gwen Crimm, the school's placement coordinator, said 98 percent of graduating students are working or are attending college. About 30 percent enter the construction industry. Crimm said the average age of an apprentice is 27 so she stays in touch with the students for at least five years after graduation to assist anyway she can. Board member Terry Nelson said sometimes an opportunity is all a person needs. "You can never hit a ball unless you get to the plate," said Nelson, who also is the executive secretary of the carpenter's union. "The school gives them the opportunity to get in the game."

Call 314-644-1525 for more information or go online at [www.constructioncareerscenter.org](http://www.constructioncareerscenter.org).

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