

Quote of the week

"I was a major tomboy. I had short hair and thought, 'I'm not really a girl — I wasn't developed — so I'll be the opposite and wear jeans, Pumas and T-shirts.' Clothes weren't a big thing for me."

— Actress Lucy Liu, on how she dressed as a youth



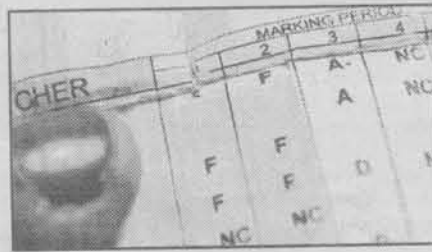
Who knew?

Exam aftermath

Contentious state high school exit exams, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test, have inspired improvement in curricula and instruction in schools but led to drop-outs and disproportionately low pass rates for minority, poor and disabled students, according to a recent national report released by the Center on Education Policy.

Now required in 19 states, which educate more than half the nation's minority students, the exams likely will affect eight in 10 minority students by 2008, according to "State High School Exams: Put to the Test." (Five other states are expected to implement the tests in the next five years.)

In 12 states, black, Hispanic, poor and disabled students and English-language learners had significantly lower pass rates than their white counterparts in reading and math. Most had to take the test multiple times to pass.



Safe haven

School provides needed stability for homeless teens

By CARA NISSMAN



Lamenting a looming pre-calculus test as she ate a chicken dinner with her peers, Amy Crissinger sounded like any other teen poised for a cram session before her first exam of the new school year.

"My classes are wicked hard," said Crissinger, 17, who takes advanced classes at North Quincy High School.

But beneath her camo belly shirt, jeans and tight braids, Crissinger holds the memory of a past rife with pain and homelessness.

"I haven't lived in a 'home' home since I was 12 years old," she said.

After bouncing from foster care to group homes to living in her boyfriend's car, Crissinger ended up on the street when they broke up. Her beacon, she said, was school. Despite her turmoil, she wanted to study and write papers, even when holed up in a car.

"I've been in four high schools in the last 2½ years," she said. "The only thing that kept me going was school. I love to learn. I like to be challenged."

Crissinger, who now participates

HOME BASE: Roada Ahmed, left, and Dieula Jeanpiere connect over dinner at the Bridge Over Troubled Waters residence. Top right, Jeanpiere's report card shows her improvement since joining the program.

in the Transitional Living Program of Bridge Over Troubled Waters Inc., a nonprofit program that serves more than 2,000 youths, is one of many homeless youths striving for an education. Of the 20,000 kids without homes in the state, nearly four out of five go to school, according to Massachusetts Citizens for Children.

Teens become homeless for countless reasons, including abuse, neglect

and aging out of or rejecting social services, said program director Buddy Henderson. But the young people without conventional homes who fight for their education are typically overachievers.

"In a way, they're the healthiest ones," said Henderson. "They see that their education is important for their future. And they haven't had that kind of structure at home or in

(state) systems, so school becomes their focus and they want to succeed in that system."

Yet their personal trials often "crawl in on them," he said, and they fail classes or drop out.

Henderson said homeless youths' mobility contributes to their academic difficulties. Indeed, more than one-fourth attend three or more schools in a year, according to the National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness.

"These kids go from one friend's couch to another couch to another," he said. "And shelter life is too hard for a kid. You have to adhere to their schedules and there aren't many role models. You see a lot of hopelessness."

Perceptive teachers and guidance counselors can stop that downward spiral. Dieula Jeanpiere often ditched school before a kind counselor at East Boston High helped her transform F's into A's. Excelling in her advanced placement U.S. history class, Jeanpiere wants to one day become a history professor.

"I went from being the girl who never showed up to being the teacher's pet," she said, proudly displaying a report card touting her leadership skills.

Homeless teens who can look past their lives' upheaval may still have to deal with insensitive classmates.

"When I was on the street, some of my fellow students were making fun of me," said Crissinger. "But my friends support me."

Many students pick on Roada Ahmed, a Somali youth who has been

in the United States for 2½ years and attends English High. (Ahmed left her strict Muslim family in Minneapolis to go to school here.)

Schoolmates told her she was "bad" and asked her, "Why aren't you with your parents?" and, "Where do you live? You live on the street," said Ahmed, 19. "But I'm happy. I'm going to school. I want to be a nurse."

Although her teachers know her situation, Crissinger refuses special treatment.

"I don't ask for leniency from anyone else," she said. "I'm like any other kid."

Still, Crissinger, who aspires to be a veterinarian, can't erase her past as she does her mistakes in math.

"The hardest thing about going to public school is when they ask you to bring in a picture of your family" for an English project, she said. "I don't have that."

Mundane routines remind Jeanpiere of her loss: "I have to go back-to-school shopping by myself," she said.

"You get left out of things," Crissinger said. "It's more than field trips. It's when they say, 'We're going to have parent-teacher conferences and we'll be looking forward to meeting your parents.' You feel different."

Getting guidance: Youths can seek dozens of services through Bridge Over Troubled Waters Inc. by calling 617-423-9575.

What's up? Tell Cara Nissman at cnissman@bostonherald.com



MAKING HER WAY: Amy Crissinger, a homeless 17-year-old, says school helps give her life structure.