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Page: 1A

YOUTHBUILD AIMS TO GIVE STUDENTS NEW DIRECTION

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EAST ST. LOUIS --- Before Darris Ivy began attending Tomorrow's Builders YouthBuild Charter School in East St. Louis, he was caught up in a life that had no direction or purpose.

"I didn't go to school and I didn't have nothing else to do," said Ivy, 19, of East St. Louis. "I was looking at things in the streets and I wasn't thinking about education and how it would help me accomplish things."

On Wednesday, Ivy was recognized for perfect attendance and a 4.0 GPA when he received his high school diploma in a ceremony held at the Casino Queen Hotel in East St. Louis. He was one of 19 students at the construction trades training school who graduated.

"Our students are all either high school dropouts or have been expelled from school or left school because traditional school didn't work for them," said Vickie Kimmel Forby, executive director of the Emerson Park Development Corp.

In fact, 23 11th graders tested at the charter school in the last school year did not meet state standards. This week, the school was listed as not having made adequate yearly progress according to the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The nonprofit community group in East St. Louis started the charter school two years ago after building a successful YouthBuild program in 1999.

YouthBuild works with high school dropouts ages 16-22 to help them earn either a general equivalency diploma or high school diploma and gain job skills in the construction trade.

Forby said that starting the charter high school, which currently has 167 students, was a byproduct of the group's success as one of the 200 YouthBuild programs in the country.

"We decided that as well as we were doing helping young people get their GEDs, a lot of people

need help getting their high school diplomas," Forby said.

Two years and more than 300 students later, Tomorrow's Builders has helped young people who are dealing with teenage parenthood, drugs, crime, poverty and homelessness to beat the odds.

The school not only provides an education for its students, but also partners with many community and social service agencies to provide services such as day care, drug treatment, help with finding a home and even probation and parole assistance.

"We not only educate students but connect them with all services available so that we can get them all they need to sustain themselves," Forby said.

Although the school's main focus is to help students gain job skills and be able to "contribute to society and be able to support a family" according to Forby, education is stressed as well.

The school uses an individualized computer instruction program that allows each student to work and learn at his or her own pace. Forby said that when students come to Tomorrow's Builders, many of them are at an elementary reading and math level after having been out of school between two months and two years.

Despite the slow start and emphasis on trade, most students plan on furthering their education after graduation. Of the 19 students who received their diplomas on Wednesday, Forby said 12 were planning college careers, mostly at Southwestern Illinois College.

Ivy, who has a 6-month old daughter, says the school has given him the tools he needs to attend Ranken Technical College in St. Louis to study heating and ventilation after graduation.

"I have more respect for myself and other people now," said Ivy. "They had a class called Leadership and being around all the positive people, it just turned me into becoming more positive and mature."

Darris Ivy sits with his classmates at the charter school's graduation ceremony at the Casino Queen on Wednesday.