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CHLOE'S
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ALL IN

All 71 members of the first graduating class
of Southland College Prep Charter High School
are going to college | PAGE 2

Whole senior class to college



**PHIL
KADNER**
pkadner@southtownstar.com

High school senior Michelle Sanders was accepted to prestigious Vassar College in New York but chose Northwestern University instead.

Her classmate, Ashley Jackson, of Matteson, accepted a \$100,000 scholarship to highly regarded Grinnell College in Iowa.

Ian Katiku, of Park Forest, was awarded a \$260,000 scholarship to Columbia University in New York, where he plans to study business and international finance.

And Nadia Ferrer, of Olympia Fields, received a total of \$892,000 in scholarship offers from six schools and plans to enroll at Tufts University to study engineering.

One by one, the names of all 71 members of the first graduating class of Southland College Prep Charter High School were called out Thursday in a ceremony designed not to single out anyone but to make a final, maybe unprecedented, announcement.

Every single student, 100 percent of the Class of 2014, is going to college.

They were enrolled at the Richton Park school, which opened in 2010, not based on academic performance but by lottery from within the attendance boundaries of Rich Township High School District 227.

Parents in the district demanded an alternative to Rich Central, Rich South and Rich East high schools because they felt too many of their students were failing to receive the education they deserved.

Blondean Davis, the school superintendent in Matteson School District 162, was frustrated to see the performance of her graduates trailing off in the high school system. Today, Davis still heads District 162 but also serves as chief executive of Southland College Prep.

She vowed four years ago that everyone one of the charter high

school's students would go to college, although more than 60 percent are considered economically disadvantaged.

Ninety-five percent of the school's students are African-American, 1 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent white and 2 percent identified as "other."

Davis told me more than a year ago that she was determined to solicit private donations to be able to send every student to college.

"It turns out, we didn't need to do that," she said Thursday.

Students at Southland College Prep were offered a total of \$5.5 million in college scholarships. Those include many multiple scholarship offers to individual students.

For example, Monee Byrd had scholarship offers to Columbia College, St. Xavier University, the University of Arizona and the University of Tampa totaling \$205,000.

"Those are all merit-based scholarships," a beaming Davis told me. "Those are not based on financial need."

But the real story can only be learned by talking to the students themselves.

"I'm going to Vanderbilt University in Tennessee to study chemical engineering," Asia Jenkins, of Olympia Fields, said.

Her favorite topics are math and science. Her grade-point average was 4.63 on a 4-point scale.

I asked her why she chose chemical engineering.

"Chemical engineers make products safe for consumer consumption," she said. "My goal is to make beauty products safe for everyday use by people."

What, in her opinion, made Southland College Prep a special school?

"There's less competition here than you might expect and a lot of support, not only from the faculty, but from your classmates," Asia said. "It's a small school (limited to an enrollment of 500) and all of us have been together since the first year. So it's like a family."

"I've never been as proud of myself as I have been since coming here. That's something that's really a focus of the school, making students believe in themselves and their ability to do anything."



Students take photos Thursday of the cake celebrating the Class of 2014 at Southland College Prep Charter High School in Richton Park.

[JIM KARCZEWSKI/FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA]

Marcell Vanarsdale, of Park Forest, has offers from Hampton University, Marquette University, Monmouth College and Morehead State University but hasn't accepted any of them yet.

"I'm hoping for a full ride," he said, noting that he has been offered only partial scholarships. "I'm hoping to go to Antioch College in Ohio because it's known for its educational rigor."

Yes, he used the word "rigor." "It had better be rigorous because I want to be an investment banker, and if you're going to be investing other peoples' money you want the best education possible," Marcell said.

Ashley Jackson, of Matteson, is going to Grinnell College, "sometimes called the Harvard of the Midwest. I want to study economics because through that you can answer a lot of questions about how people behave, not just what they buy but why, and obtain a better understanding of not just this country but the world."

Students at Southland College Prep go to school from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. In addition, there's a summer school and optional classes on Saturdays.

"We track our students' learning progress, and if we discover they do better with one teacher than an-

other we will make sure they get the teacher who is best for them," Davis told me. "It's not about us, after all, but about the students."

The school has special training in public speaking, personal grooming, self-confidence and ethics. Students wear uniforms, including preppy-style blazers with an emblem on the jacket pocket containing the letters SCP.

Ask Ron Bean, the Southland Charter Prep board president, the secret of the school's success and he answers succinctly.

"This is what happens when adults do their jobs," said Bean, a former mayor of Park Forest.

Davis emphasizes that she supports traditional public schools, contends that she was forced into launching the charter school and maintains that the success of Southland College Prep is transferable.

I'm not so sure. While the average ACT scores of Southland's students are slightly below the state average, the faculty, parents and students obviously are highly motivated.

Determined leadership with vision should not be underestimated.

"When the students go on to college, we will not desert them," Davis said. "We are going to track their progress, offer encouragement and help."

Every child deserves that.