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Md. accelerator schools to speed pupils to diploma

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The Associated Press

BALTIMORE - Shane Smith is already two years behind in school. But as he started classes Monday at a new high school, he planned to speed through his freshman and sophomore years in nine months.

That's a tough order for a 16-year-old who should be in the 11th grade but has struggled academically, in part due to the death of his father when he was a boy.

However, organizers of one of Baltimore's three new accelerator schools say frequent testing, extracurricular activities and high expectations will get students such as Smith on track and keep them there.

"I feel that it's going to be tough," he said before the start of the school year. "When I get used to the work, I'll probably get good grades, move on and pass."

The city school system has hired One Bright Ray Inc. of Philadelphia to run Baltimore Community High School, which Smith attends, and Massachusetts-based Diploma Plus to operate Baltimore Antioch Diploma Plus and Baltimore Liberation Diploma Plus.

The goal is to help students at risk of dropping out because of embarrassment about their age or economic pressures to leave school to work.

One Bright Ray has seen most of the students at its three accelerator schools in Philadelphia graduate on time, said deputy CEO Marcus Delgado.

In its 2009 report, the U.S. Department of Education announced the national dropout rate was 9 percent in 2007. Similar numbers weren't available for Baltimore, but school officials say the

number of students who were behind indicated the system needed a new option for those in danger of falling through the cracks.

"If there is not an option for these students, it's either back to the streets or getting their GED," Delgado said.

To enroll, students must be between 16 and 21 and at least two years behind. Students choose to take part, helping to dispel the notion that the schools are dumping grounds for those with behavioral or learning problems. A total of 900 are enrolled for this fall.

"We need to step away from this idea of schools for bad kids," said Baltimore City Schools CEO Dr. Andres Alonso.

Students might choose to enroll in an accelerator school for various reasons, said Cassandra Millette, a Maryland liaison for One Bright Ray.

Some are new parents needing to enter the work force sooner. Some are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students, a segment of the student population that is three times more likely to drop out of schools than their heterosexual counterparts, according to Mental Health America. Others have fallen behind because schools failed to recognize they weren't learning what they should.

School staff hope to not only pass Smith and his classmates but to give them as close to a typical high school experience as possible, a prom, sports teams and after-school clubs. Millette said students in the accelerator schools are no less bright and goal-oriented than those in traditional settings.

"We will not have a negative spin in this school," she said. "This is not a place for students who are on the fence. They will work harder."

The Open Society Institute-Baltimore, a philanthropic organization, provided \$675,000 to the city's transformation schools initiative, which helped Alonso add the three accelerator programs.

The idea is "to capture many of the kids who felt they had nowhere to go, or had no success in traditional settings," Alonso said.

Education policy researchers say similar schools around the country are successful when they are proficiency-based, ensuring the students retain information and perform at the required level.

"The really good ones let the student accelerate at the student's own pace," said Kathy Christie, a former teacher and current co-director of research analysis for the Education Commission of the States. In that way, "they are like any other school."

Baltimore Community principal Brian Jones said students there will be tracked carefully and a small student body will make it easier to pinpoint those who need even more help.

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On the Net:

One Bright Ray Inc.: <http://www.onebrightray.org>

Diploma Plus: <http://tinyurl.com/oequne>

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