

**North Star Academy Charter School of Newark
North Star Academy School District
Newark, New Jersey**



Eyes on The Prize: Four-Year College for All Students

Julie Jackson, Principal, Vailsburg Elementary School

I believe that North Star exists in order to provide our families with a top-notch education that truly prepares students to attend and graduate from a four-year college.

James Verilli, Co-founder, North Star Academy Charter School of Newark

Newark is a city in need. To us the achievement gap that exists—Newark’s children [are] behind other children and their peers in the suburbs—is an injustice and we need to do something about it and close it and fight it. So we wanted to create a school that would do that – that would give kids an equal education opportunity and a chance to go to college. We wanted to change those statistics dramatically; we wanted to give kids an education that would prepare them for college, just to get into, succeed at, and graduate from college. College dropout rate for low-income students of color is horrible, and so again that is another achievement gap that we want to close. So we’ve created a program to try and support our kids through college to help make sure they graduate. We start the college message from the beginning. With kindergarten parents we say, “If you want your kids to go to North Star you should be thinking about college now.” Because you know, that’s what suburban parents do. More affluent suburban parents are thinking about college from the very beginning of their children’s education and we want our parents to do the same. So in elementary school they travel in groups named after colleges. So that a group of students will be the Syracuse group – colleges where we currently have our own alumni. And so we start the college message from the beginning.

Yasmin Vargas, First Grade Instructional Leader, Vailsburg Elementary School

That means we talk about it every single day. Each classroom is named after a college. So my classroom is named Cornell University. In morning circle, each one is doing their college chant. So the language and the idea behind college graduation is there every single day. This is not something that we are doing kind of on the side, it’s there for students, and every single opportunity you get, whether it’s a presentation and they present a lot in front of the classroom, snack, during choice time, they have pieces that they share that they write at home about their learning, about an experience on the weekend, and they are bringing that to the table and any opportunity that we have to talk about what that means: “Wow. I love how you projected your voice. I love how you made eye contact with the audience; maybe you could teach a professional class in college one day.”

Art Worrell, History Department Chair, College Preparatory High School

Every class, every subject area really has that as a side focus or content, of course, that content that students need but also those college readiness skills and how the two intertwine to create a really college-ready student. Each year the chair of the college study department here in the high school—he does some amazing work with our alumni and our seniors. He actually goes to visit a lot of them on college campuses.

James Verilli

We always look at how our students are doing in college. What are they struggling with? What has been difficult for them? And what can we do better on this level to better prepare them to succeed in college.

Art Worrell

Here in high school certainly—we are a college preparatory high school—so a major focus for me this year and the history department has been college-ready rigor. So backwards planning from things like the AP test for history has been really a starting point for me, but in addition to that, thinking about skills and habits that any successful college student has. So it's not just about getting into college, it's about being successful when you are there, graduating with a degree and going off to live whatever life you want to live.