

CHS intervention specialist honored as ReadyKids Youth Advocate  
written by Newspark Team | April 16, 2018



For more than a decade, Dianna Poe and her colleagues in Charlottesville High School's WALK program have helped at-risk students overcome obstacles in all aspects of their lives to earn their diplomas.

"In a world where flashy, cutting-edge, shiny and sexy gets all the attention, we are a team of people that are plodding," said Poe, the director of WALK. "We are imperfect, we are messy and we are broken. ... Yet we are authentic, and we love kids in whatever ways they need."

Poe was at the center of attention during the ReadyKids Community Breakfast fundraiser at the Omni Charlottesville Hotel on Monday when she received the John L. Snook Child Advocate Award for 2018.

"There are no shortcuts for what Dianna and her team are doing," said Rich Schragger, president of the ReadyKids board. "Their work is at the retail level, one child at a time."

WALK stands for "Work Achieves Lasting Knowledge," and alludes to its students' ambitions to walk across the stage to receive their high school diplomas. Since its founding in 2007, WALK has served more than 1,400 students and helped more than 440 students graduate.

Teachers and counselors refer students to WALK when they are failing a course required for graduation or need to recover credits to graduate on time. The program allows these students to work intensively with teachers and volunteer tutors before, during and after school to complete those courses.

Poe was hired as director of WALK after tutoring Charlottesville students in foster care for several

years. A 2009 block grant from the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation and donations from the DN Batten Foundation and local philanthropist Sonjia Smith have enabled WALK to achieve financial sustainability and extend its support of students far beyond school.

"Private funds and public schooling allow us to serve children holistically," Poe said. "Having your daily needs met is vital for good learning. ... Getting to graduation is nearly impossible if you are experiencing the effects of trauma or depression or extreme poverty."

WALK received \$186,239 in federal funds through Charlottesville City Schools this year and used an additional \$110,000 from private donations. Along with staff salaries, the budget provides students with food, clothing, eyeglasses and other necessities. Students also have received financial assistance for rent, utilities, car insurance and legal fees.

This year, WALK hired a full-time mental health counselor and paid for college visits, field trips and student memberships at the Brooks Family YMCA.

"We tell our kids that not having enough doesn't mean that you aren't enough," Poe said.

James Henderson, associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction, designed the WALK program and has worked with Poe throughout her tenure with the city schools.

"[Poe] builds relationships. Students and adults really trust her," Henderson said. "They know she is going to be in their corner when issues arise."

Henderson said WALK has played a key role in helping Charlottesville City Schools lower its dropout rate.

The dropout rate at CHS was 6.2 percent in 2017, down from 13.2 percent in 2008. The high school's graduation rate was 89.6 percent last year, less than 1 percent below the state average.

"WALK is about supporting the student and helping them feel successful instead of overwhelmed," Henderson said.

Airea Garland, a 2009 CHS graduate, was one of the first students to go through the program. Today, she is a student affairs associate at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.

Garland said the collaborative meeting spaces in the UVa iLab at Darden remind her of the small classroom that housed WALK. "Ms. Poe created a similar place to for students to relax and unwind, to grow and wonder," Garland said.

"Ms. Poe is amazing at just being there," Garland said. "She does not sugarcoat. She does not act like she understands. She just provides a safe space. ... She was someone who stood by her word. And that meant a lot to me."

The winner of the Child Advocate Award is chosen each year by a panel that includes a member of the ReadyKids board and several Charlottesville-area residents.

Rosa Atkins, superintendent of Charlottesville City Schools, and Pam Moran, superintendent of Albemarle County Public Schools, shared the award in 2017.