Students to Tell of Success in Public Schools for Documentary Project

By Karla Scoon Reid

A new campaign aims to use students’ personal stories to promote the positive influence public schools can have on the lives of children who are poor and members of minority groups.

Through a documentary and a teacher professional-development program, “In A Perfect World … Listen to the Children” wants to show that disadvantaged students can achieve academically, given the right instructional tools and motivation at school.

“We’re trying to show that there is much hope—even for students facing family and financial challenges,” said Eric J. Cooper, the president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, a Lake Success, N.Y.-based nonprofit group that helps train teachers working in city schools. “They still can succeed because of good schools.”

Gamillah Inc., a Minneapolis-based company founded last year by Manuela Testolini, the wife of the pop singer Prince, will lead fund raising for the $4.5 million project, which eventually will include a book and a Web site that will track the profiled students’ progress. The company’s foundation, called In A Perfect World, has donated $150,000 to launch the project, which was announced in July at the Aspen Ideas Festival, hosted by the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colo.

N.A.K. Production Associates, a Bethesda, Md.-based company that produces television and documentary programs, will begin filming next month in the Minneapolis area, where the National Urban Alliance is training teachers. Students in Birmingham, Ala., Bridgeport, Conn., and possibly Seattle also will appear in the film.

The Aspen Institute, a think tank with headquarters in Washington, is expected to provide research data detailing the economic struggles of the communities featured in the project.

Case Studies

Norman A. Koltz, the president of N.A.K., said that “In A Perfect World” was inspired, in part, by a 1995 documentary series he produced called “A Cry From the Edge.” Shown on PBS, it chronicled students who were on the verge of failing in school and in life.
The series, which was underwritten by the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and included a four-part professional-development component, was based on Mr. Cooper’s cognitive and cultural teaching strategies that help students to think more deeply, creatively, and critically, bridging the gap between what they know and what they do not know. Mr. Cooper said he stressed how to teach students to love learning and how best to learn so that it becomes a lifelong process of discovery.

For the “In A Perfect World” documentary, poor and minority students will be asked to depict their ideal world through poetry, art, music, and words. In addition to the students’ stories, the filmmakers will present case studies detailing how the students’ schools were transformed into nurturing and supportive environments that improve student learning.

“We will document the ways schools and school systems can change from being factories of failure into schools and districts of hope, hard work, and high achievement,” Mr. Cooper said.

Ms. Nelson, who has worked with troubled children living in shelters, said that “In A Perfect World” would help define what children say they need to be more successful, rather than letting adults give voice to what they perceive students need.

The effort will be results-oriented, she said, since it will track the academic achievement of students attending schools where the National Urban Alliance is training teachers.

“This is not just about signing a check and hoping for the best,” Ms. Nelson said.

In Birmingham, the University of Alabama-Birmingham is in the second year of a partnership with the National Urban Alliance, the College Board, and the Birmingham public schools to train current and prospective teachers to teach low-income students attending urban schools. The university is recruiting up to 50 teachers to work in urban districts for its Training and Retaining Urban Teachers program.