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## **Maintaining the principles of Benjamin Banneker**

In 20th year, honors math and science society continues to offer mentoring and motivation to minority youths

by Robert Dongu | Staff Writer – Gazette Newspaper

Eastern Middle School student Kira Dunlap, 11, has big plans.

A student in the school's magnet program in Silver Spring, Dunlap hopes to continue her music education some day at Harvard University or the Julliard School of Music. Yet she also understands the importance of focusing on other academic subjects.

"I can see the relation," she said. "Band relies on math."

On Saturday, she listened along with fellow members of the Benjamin Banneker Honors Math and Science Society as Herbert Thompson, who has a Ph.D. in statistics, speak at Banneker Middle School in Burtonsville about getting college scholarships and preparing financially for college.

"We did some comparative analysis of what it would cost to go to a two-year college and then a four-year college [versus] a straight four-year college," said Thompson, who said the group also examined differences for in-state and out-of-state tuition and tuition variations based on region.

The nonprofit program, which began at Banneker Middle School and owes its name to Benjamin Banneker, a Maryland native and prominent astronomer and mathematician, draws minority middle and high school students from county schools. The society is celebrating its 20th anniversary after being founded by the late J.D. Speller, whose wife Arlene now runs the society.

Part of society's focus is on tutoring. Students travel monthly by school bus to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, where they receive tutoring from midshipmen. But the focus isn't always on academics, said 2008 Paint Branch High School graduate Drew Speller, son of J.D. and Arlene Speller.

"The midshipmen help motivate you and tutor you ... anything you need," said Speller, a former society member who is studying communications at Montgomery College.

Speller said he thinks the midshipmen's demanding schedule helped him apply time-management principles to his life.

Jonathan Grant, another former society member who was Speller's teammate on the Paint Branch football team, spoke to the audience with Speller about college scholarships. Grant agreed with Speller that the midshipmen's interest in them went beyond academics.

"Even though they helped us with tutoring, they told us about themselves and how they got [to the Naval Academy]," said Grant, a Morgan State University freshman whose father Michael serves as a volunteer for the group.

Although the program has forged lasting bonds between students and tutors, students have also shown notable academic improvement.

Society member Akeem Goaggette, 14, said he has seen better grades since being in the program. He added that his tutor helps him with his homework.

"They help us bring up our grades," said Goaggette, a freshman at Paint Branch. "The people at the Naval Academy encourage us to do well in school. I've had better grades since I've been here."

Thompson, who also has a child in the program, said as a parent-mentor he wants students to understand what challenges they may face when paying for college, especially with recent economic challenges.

Jocelyn Santos has had three children in the program. Her youngest, sixth-grader William, wants to attend the Naval Academy. He could not attend Saturday's meeting due to a Civil Air Patrol meeting.

Although none of her children were in attendance, Santos was there and said some of the parents whose children are no longer in the program still dedicate their time to serve as chaperones on field trips.

"We have good friends," Santos said.