At Community Preparatory School in South Providence, students overflow with thanks

November 28, 2013 01:00 AM

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PROVIDENCE — With all the frenzy around Black Friday, it is worthwhile to pause for a few moments and hear what children have to say about Thanksgiving.

And not just any children, but those whose parents sometimes struggle to pay their bills, whose families arrived here from places where opportunities were scarce and education wasn't a given.

The students are from Community Preparatory School, a private school in the South End where a third of the students are Latino and nearly as many are black. Founded 30 years ago by three teachers, the school thinks that low-income, urban children deserve a prep school education at a lot less than private school prices.

Annual tuition is $14,000, but only a fraction of the students pay the full cost.

The children here are thankful for things that many adults take for granted.

"I'm thankful because we have the most brilliant rules for this school: no bullying, no pushing and staying safe," says Ben Chen, a third grader whose parents come from China. "I'm thankful that my dad survived heart disease. He stopped breathing for a few seconds."

Another third grader, Koko Alepan, is grateful that her parents work hard so she can attend a school where classes are small and at least one adult knows if a child is having a bad day.

"I'm thankful for my mom always telling me to work hard," says Koko, whose parents come from Nigeria.

Although the school building is shopworn, the atmosphere within is enthusiastic. Students beam. When they greet an adult, they shake hands and smile. They need little encouragement to talk. In fact, they're positively chatty.

Sophia-Joy Agbelese, a fifth grader from Providence, is grateful for having "a nice family, food to eat and this school." Her favorite subject is math, although she acknowledges that it's very intense.

"I like it here," she said, "because it's really small, and you know all the teachers and the students aren't mean."

At Community Prep, she said, the teachers talk to everyone, not just the students who are super-smart or troublemakers.

Community Prep is a school where small acts of kindness are honored at Day Break, a morning meeting for the whole community, says the school's founder and Head of School Dan Corley.

For these children, relationships, not possessions, are the heart of their Thanksgiving blessings.

It is touching to see how many students are grateful for their grandparents. Noelya Delacruz, an eighth grader, says her grandmother tucks her in every night, and "If I'm having a rough day, she talks to me."

Isabella Ferreira, an eighth grader from East Providence, has kind words for everyone: her mother, who cooks and cleans and takes care of people when they're sick, her brother, "even though he's annoying," and her aunt, who looks after a blind neighbor.

"I'm thankful for my dad, too," she says, "because he helps me with my homework."

Eighth grader Donnie Sparks, of Cranston, says Community Prep has pushed him academically in ways he could never have imagined. A math whiz, Donnie says, "Here, there are no Ds or Fs. It goes from an A to a C-."

"My Mom is always there for me, through the good, the bad and the ugly," Donnie says. "I'm thankful to be alive in America."

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