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Kids encouraged to use knowledge in picking life's path

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Motivational speaker Al Duncan doesn't believe "knowledge is power" is a true statement.

"It's not false, either. That statement is incomplete," **Duncan** said. "Knowledge is power, if you use it."

On Thursday, **Duncan** visited Burlington High School, James Madison Middle School and Oak Street Middle School to talk to students about choices, values, education and image.

Duncan was invited to speak at the schools after community members suggested bringing in more African American role models for students. The recommendation was made during a series of community meetings held by the school district this fall.

While **Duncan** is now a successful lecturer, author and columnist, life hasn't always been easy for him.

Born and raised in a rough neighborhood in north Philadelphia, **Duncan** was faced with a series of tribulations throughout his youth. When he was 5 years old, he was molested by a family friend. At 15, he discovered his childhood hero, his father, was addicted to crack cocaine.

"Devastated but not defeated, **Al** refused to allow his personal problems to stop him," said Assistant Superintendent Jane Evans, introducing **Duncan** to students at Oak Street.

As an adult, **Duncan** found success as a professional saxophone player and later an executive chef. After working with youth in Atlanta, **Duncan** decided to pursue his current career.

During his hourlong presentations, **Duncan** delivered four main points to the student bodies that focused on choices made every day.

The first was "Choose to use your knowledge."

When people do not apply lessons and information they pick up over time, they end up struggling to find success, **Duncan** said. To meet their goals, students must use their knowledge.

"Y'all have more knowledge at your fingertips right now than most of the greatest people in the history of the world," **Duncan** said. "Think about that."

Duncan's second message was "Choose between what is right, and what is easy."

While he was working as a professional musician at age 24, **Duncan** received a call from his

mother, who was frantic that his 12-year-old brother, Nate, had fallen in with a rough crowd and was staying out all night.

After receiving the call, **Duncan** decided to sell his saxophone and move home to help. Though **Duncan** had made good money as a musician, he had squandered most of it away and had to sell his prized instrument to make the trip.

When **Duncan** reached his little brother, he realized the best thing to do to help him was to pack up and move. **Duncan** and his brother moved to Atlanta, where **Duncan** acted as his brother's caregiver while simultaneously working his way up in the culinary world.

Raising a teenager in his mid-20s wasn't an easy thing to do, but "it was the right thing to do," **Duncan** said.

Duncan also told students to "choose to know your own values" and "choose to build your brand," meaning that students should work on and maintain a positive self-image.

Evans said she believed **Duncan** delivered several important messages to students that she hopes they will maintain.

"I hope students will remember the important steps that he gave them," Evans said. "Especially that they are making their choices. Life doesn't just happen to them."

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