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Oprah's tea to help New Haven school, one cup at a time

By Rachel Chinapen, New Haven Register

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A cup a day sends money the students' way.

That is possible because [Pathways to College at James Hillhouse High School](#) is one of four programs that will benefit from every sale of Oprah Winfrey's new product, [Teavana Oprah Chai Tea](#). The tea will hit the shelves at Teavana and Starbucks locations April 29.

Winfrey partnered with Starbucks to create the special blend this year. For each sale, Starbucks and Teavana will make a donation to the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy Foundation. The foundation will divvy the money up between [Pathways to College](#), [Girls Inc.](#), [National CARES Mentoring Movement](#), and the [U.S. Dream Academy](#).

Chelsea Hettrick, OWN director of communications, said specifics about how the money will be divided will not be provided.

Winfrey has donated to the Pathways program for years and supported the printing of the guidebook that students use in the program, said Pathways to College founder and President Judith Griffin. The nonprofit program has been adopted by 15 inner-city and rural high schools across five states, including Hillhouse where the program serves 75 students and works with four teachers. Griffin said she is looking to expand the program in New Haven and will meet with Superintendent Garth Harries in the coming weeks to explore options.

"We serve hundreds of high school students every year and what it is that we want to do is try and be sure that the students who are working with us, whatever their circumstances are, are able to access complete college and they are able to work hard at school change in the schools," Griffin said.

The program starts with a cohort of students in their freshman year and works to keep them on the "pathway to college." The second part of the program focuses on the students creating social change in their schools and encouraging their peers outside of the program also to stay on the pathway to

college, Griffin said. She said the program doesn't target students who are already on the pathway but instead looks for "potential rather than necessarily performance."

"School reform often starts at the top and comes down all the way, our program starts the other way," she said. "We believe that the students, throughout the history of this country, have led social change, either because of their suffering or because of their activism. Because they want things to change and they meet in mass and demand this, and demand that. They are very active participants in all of the social change that has occurred."

Griffin said Winfrey's decision to continue supporting youth education in a new way parallels with the "show some love" component of the program. "Show some love" focuses on students taking on the responsibility of making their schools, communities and the world, a better place..

"Miss Winfrey doesn't have to show some love to the kids in Hillhouse School," Griffin said. "They are far away from her; she doesn't know them individually. She chose, in her own generosity, to reach out to not only the kids in Hillhouse and the kids in Pathway, but as you know she really is very invested in youth education."

"She's a wonderful role model," Griffin said.

At Hillhouse, Griffin said the students are working on a way to memorialize a teacher who died; they're considering planting a tree or a memorial stone in the atrium. Seeing Winfrey enact change encourages the students to do the same on a smaller scale.

"They can of course see that she's interested in them. She has a choice, she doesn't have to do this but she has chosen to do it, and if she has, they can," Griffin said. "They can do it in their own way. It becomes full circle."

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