

## Accepted

“Accepted” offers a unique and intriguing look at the world of college admissions and the true cost of getting that first foothold into elite American society. This surprising documentary promises a heartening story of education for the beleaguered, when director and co-cinematographer Dan Chen introduces us to the promise and predicaments of the T.M. Landry College Preparatory school in rural Breau Bridge, Louisiana. (*The film, released in the DC area on July 1, runs 92 mins, and is not rated*).

Landry Prep (founded in 2005) is housed in a sparse warehouse in a poor town but has gained a reputation for sending its graduates on to elite universities like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. The students supposedly receive rigorous academic training aimed to meet the intense expectations of the school’s charismatic director, Mike Landry. Co-founder of the school and energizer bunny Landry drives his kids like a drill sergeant, urging them on to their college dreams. Most of the school’s small population is poor Black students with apparent potential to break out into new lives.

While the film shows little clear classwork being done, it highlights the relentless, boisterous demands of Landry, to whom the filmmakers gain unbelievable access. In *alta voce*, the director exhorts his charges to follow their dream by telling them they cannot fail if they work hard enough within his system. The kids are thrilled at the prospect and follow Landry’s lead by wearing sweatshirts labelled with the top schools they hope to attend. (The film recalls elements of 1980’s “Lean on Me” with Morgan Freeman playing the role of a tyrannical principal.)

Among the school’s students we see preparing for college, we follow the personal stories of four thoughtful students looking to overcome countless obstacles to achieve their dreams. There is Cathy, a bright Latina who is the pride of a single parent household but who has doubts: “This is not a normal school,” she says. Attractive Alicia lives at the poverty level but hopes she can help bring her family and herself a better future. Adia is another Latina with high hopes, as is Isaac, a handsome junior who carries his dreams on a sweatshirt emblazoned with a “Stanford” logo.

Over the years, the tiny school receives national attention when media report feel-good stories about Landry’s kids attaining admission to major universities like Harvard, but, in November 2018, the *New York Times* publishes an exposé on Landry’s unconventional methods. In the *Times* piece, the school is accused of doctoring transcripts and college applications, and Landry is alleged to have physically abused and pressured his students. Investigations ensue.

Each of the students we have followed in the film is left to contend with uncomfortable truths about their school and the overall college admissions system, and all decide to leave Landry for other educational prospects.

“Accepted” may not rise to the quality of other recent excellent film examinations of US high-schoolers, such as “Step (2017)” and “Boy’s State (2020,” but it still fills its more modest role with care and heart.