

How Can We Help Struggling Students in High School?

SEND THEM TO COLLEGE

By Ashley C. Killough

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A group of 23 students walked across the stage at El Paso Community College in May to get their associate degrees.

They had just finished their junior year of high school.

The students attend Mission Early College High School, in El Paso, which challenges minority and low-income youths to earn one to two years of college credits while in high school. The program is part of a nationwide effort to bridge the gap between secondary and postsecondary institutions, encouraging more students to go on to college and tackling the alarmingly high need for remedial education.

The Early College High School Initiative was started by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is

coordinated by Jobs for the Future, and is sponsored by 19 other foundations as well. The project opened its first three schools in 2002, hoping to expand to 170 by 2008. But it has grown faster than expected.

Now, seven years in, it has 201 schools serving 42,000 students, who enroll in college courses tuition-free.

This year, the schools graduated about 2,500 students, the most ever. Data on college-going aren't yet available for them, but 89% of the 2008 graduates enrolled in two-year or four-year colleges right out of high school, compared with 66% of students nationwide. And the vast majority of the initiative's class of 2008 earned at least some college credit while in high school.

Ashley C. Killough is a staff reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education. Condensed, with permission, from The Chronicle of Higher Education, 55 (July 24, 2009), A21-22. Copyright 2009, The Chronicle of Higher Education. The complete version of the article is available at <http://chronicle.com>.

The supporting foundations hope to add 300 more high schools by 2020 to the early-college program.

'A Stretch Goal'

Researchers praise the progress made by the schools but also note the challenges. The most obvious: helping already-struggling students not only graduate, but do so with college credit in hand.

Nancy Hoffman, who directs Jobs for the Future's part of the early college initiative, says officials decided to change the original goal, of helping all students earn associate degrees, to what they consider a more practical goal: earning up to two years of college credit.

"I think it was always a big stretch to say that in four years, almost of all of the students who entered would graduate with associate degrees," says Hoffman. "But it provided a stretch goal, and more and more students are actually accomplishing it."

Over all, studies show that early-college students outperform other students in their school districts on math, English, and reading exams required by their states. Attendance rates are over 90%, and grade-to-grade promotion rates also exceed 90%.

Schools in the initiative form partnerships with local colleges, 72% of which are two-year colleges. More than half of the schools are

located on college campuses; others are nearby.

By setting college-level expectations for students at young ages, the initiative prepares them for being on a campus—a cultural and academic shift that turns many new high school graduates away from higher education.

But blending college and high school expectations has proved difficult. On college campuses, students themselves are responsible for their education, while in high school, that responsibility falls more squarely on the teacher.

San Diego's School of Media, Visual and Performing Arts, for one, tries to make the transition more seamless by having teachers accompany students to their courses at San Diego City College. "It allows the high school teachers to see what the demands of the college class are and to see what is expected, so they can help the students follow through," says June E. Richards, artistic director of the campus theater and coordinator of the early-college grant at the college.

Starting Earlier Yet

A growing number of early-college schools, Hoffman says, are even pushing the model into middle school grades. The Queens School of Inquiry, which partners with the City University of New York's Queens College, is one of about 30 such schools. Students

Helping Struggling Students in High School

there can start earning college credits in 9th grade, but 6th graders, too, start out with "stunning" amounts of homework, says Mary Beth Schaefer, the college's liaison to the school.

"We know them for three years before they start their college courses," she says. "We're not setting them up for failure. There's no guessing game for how they're going to do during high school."

Considerable support is often needed, because admissions standards at early-college high schools are nontraditional. Some use lotteries; others require lengthy applications. But in almost all cases, the students most likely to get in are those who are struggling aca-

demically, need special-education plans, or are learning English as a second language.

From the beginning, students are told that they will need hard work, long hours, and summer classes to reach their goals. Posters showing the seven-year track are placed all over the school. "One girl asked me, 'How many college hours will I get?'," Schaefer says. "I said she won't 'get' any; she'll have to earn them. We want the kids to understand that what they're doing now impacts their futures in significant ways."

To earn associate degrees while in high school, early-college students have longer school days and take courses during the summer.

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Even so, says Hoffman, "none of us feel that the point of this is speed. The point is that they can build confidence and succeed."

Early Skepticism

Assigning rigorous course work to students who normally wouldn't consider college produced skepticism at first. Critics said it would overwhelm students already behind.

A few years into the initiative, Raymond F. Bacchetti, an education scholar who was consulting for the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, interviewed dozens of college faculty members and administrators and found that most expressed concern over the acceleration of the learning process and the students' maturity. "They thought that higher ed really did mean higher complexity levels," he says. "But while they felt the associate degree was an unreasonable expectation, they were committed to enabling underserved students to get at least some benefit by doing one year of college during high school."

Bacchetti was pleased that the Gates Foundation changed its original goal.

Melinda Mechur Karp, a senior research associate at the Institute on Education and the Economy/Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, says that while dual-enrollment programs have

historically been meant for advanced students, recent data show that the counterintuitive method of placing lower-achieving youths in similar programs is paying off. With about 86% of low-income students now saying they want to get bachelor's degrees or higher, the problem is not motivation but preparation, she says.

"Part of what's powerful about dual enrollment is learning how to be a college student," Mechur Karp says. "It's not just the content that's different, it's everything. If you don't know how to study, and you don't know how to act around a professor, you're not going to do well."

Issues of Financing

But as early-college high schools grow more popular, sustaining them remains a problem. Supporting foundations cover the expensive start-up costs, but continuing operations are backed by the school districts—and can cost 5% to 12% more than educating students at regular public high schools does. Covering college tuition for students is an additional cost. In some cases, colleges agree to foot the bill for tuition; in others, it's up to the high schools. And as states, seeking to balance their budgets, cut funds for community colleges, some of them have been forced to limit course offerings. That will likely affect their ability to accommodate students

from early-college high schools.

California's 110 community colleges, for example, have said they may have to turn away as many as 250,000 students this fall. High school students "can't be guaranteed a class at the city college, but we try to do everything in our power to get them in," says Joyce Arntson, executive director of intersegmental partnerships at the Foundation for California Community Colleges. "But we have to be careful, though, because we don't want to inconvenience the other college students."

The work required of teachers at early-college high schools is intense and can lead to burnout. "These are incredibly dedicated staff," says Elisabeth Barnett, associate director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, at Columbia's Teachers College. "They provide small, caring learning environments, and students do well because they're supported. But sometimes it's hard for adults to sustain that."

Some professors say they didn't even realize they had high school students in their classes. Others say they welcome the students because they are honest about wanting to be there, Barnett says.

'I Love Challenges'

Whatever the hurdles, the early-college schools are helping many of their students. During her speech

as valedictorian in June, Daisy D. Neri congratulated her 78 fellow graduates at the School of Media, Visual and Performing Arts, in San Diego. Not only had she balanced high school, work, and home life, but she had also completed 16 hours of college credit. "A lot of people may not see graduating high school as an achievement or an accomplishment," she says, "but I know that it was really hard for plenty of my friends."

The school is one of three early-college high schools in the area that send students to San Diego City College.

"Sometimes they're too lenient on you in high school," Neri says. "But going to the city college makes you be mature and take things to the next level. It was all about preparing, preparing, preparing."

Neri, who is the 8th of 12 children, will be the first in her family to pursue a bachelor's degree. She has been awarded grants to cover the entire cost of her tuition and fees at San Diego State University, where she started this fall as a psychology major.

In fact, 99% of her classmates have enrolled at two-year or four-year institutions.

Neri is excited, not nervous, about attending a university. "I've learned that I love challenges," she says. "When someone tells me I can't do something, it's an adrenaline rush to keep going and prove people wrong." ■

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