

In early college high schools, students earn associate's degrees

Approach seeks to boost college attendance, graduation

By Sheila Carmody
Senior Writer

Chance Hunt will attend his senior prom in May, graduate from high school in June and complete his associate's degree in August—all in the same year.

The 17-year-old Buffalo student attends Middle College High School, an alternative public school that integrates high school and college-level work, and allows students to earn a high school diploma and two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree in five years.

Hunt accelerated through the program by passing tests in basic math and English and will graduate even earlier than the five-year program allows. His classmates are not far behind. Some of them will finish in December; others will take the allotted five years and graduate in May 2008.

High school reform

"Early college high schools" are part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's high school reform initiative. The foundation has invested \$120 million in developing the secondary-postsecondary schools with the goal of opening 239 of them by 2011.

They are more than halfway there. So far, 130 of the schools have opened nationwide. New York State has 11 of the high schools and more are planned. For example, five early college high schools are slated to open in Rochester over the next several years.

A \$400,000 foundation grant pays for start-up costs, said Fred Frelow of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, one of 14 organizations appointed to help establish the new schools. School districts and colleges partner in the development and management of each school and jointly cover the schools' operating costs.

Targeting 'middle-of-the-road' students

Proponents say the program is needed because too few students pursue college, and graduation rates are low for those who do.

Although nearly 75 percent of high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education, more than half of them fail to complete a degree,

according to Jobs for the Future, the organization that provides oversight for the early college initiative.

The numbers are even worse for low-income, minority students. Only 18 percent of African-Americans between the ages of 25 and 29, and 10 percent of Latinos complete a four-year degree by age 29, compared with 34 percent of whites, according to Jobs for the Future. Upper-income students are seven times more likely than low-income students to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24.

Meanwhile, college graduates earn 70 percent more than high school graduates.

Early college high schools are based on evidence that challenge is a greater motivator than remediation, even for students who struggle in school, Frelow said.

Early college high schools target middle-of-the-road students who need that extra push to motivate them to graduate from high school and college, said Susan Doyle, principal of the Buffalo school.

The requirements for entry into the Buffalo program include:

- A grade average of 65 to 85.
- Three elementary school teacher recommendations.
- Parent and student interviews.

The target population for the Gates Foundation is low-income minority students, but early college is an idea that has merit for a wide range of students, Frelow said.

Early college high schools seek to improve graduation rates by

- Coupling rigorous instruction with intensive support.
- Compressing the number of years to a college degree.
- Removing financial and other barriers to college.

Source: Jobs for the Future

Buffalo's blend

Buffalo's Middle College High School is a partnership between the Buffalo school district and Erie Community College. Buffalo students apply for admission and begin taking college-level humanities courses in 10th grade, moving back and forth between a high school building and a college campus located two blocks apart in downtown Buffalo.

The school has 292 students in grades 9-12 and 80 new students are accepted each year. All students com-



Buffalo's Middle College High School students walk two blocks to Erie Community College for college chemistry and college art classes.

Photos courtesy of Middle College High School

mit to complete their associate's degree, said Marcia Jackson, Erie Community College's associate vice president for student affairs. Each student chooses a major: criminal justice, computer information systems, building and trades, office technology, or business administration.

"We hope they go on to complete a four-year degree, but the courses of study chosen to be offered will allow them to go on to an entry-level, salaried job with benefits," Doyle said.

As a criminal justice major, Hunt took introduction to criminal law, criminal law and procedures, crime and society, and criminal courts and procedures. He plans to transfer to one of four universities — Pepperdine, Morehouse, Chapman or New York University — in the fall, where he'll pursue a bachelor's degree in law or economics, he said.

Aside from the college courses and the element of freedom afforded by the college environment, Buffalo's Middle College High School is a fairly typical high school. Hunt was on the bowling, track and field, and debate teams. He's been student council president two years in a row and sits on the prom committee.

Supporting students

Buffalo students receive mentoring and tutoring services. Freshmen and sophomores attend "focus" classes twice a week, where they break into small groups for discussions surrounding conflict resolution, cultural diversity, sexual awareness, sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy.

Juniors and seniors attend a "seminar" class twice a week where their teachers track their progress in college courses. By the time they're juniors, they spend most of the time on the community college campus, Doyle said. High school teachers have to make sure they're spending that time wisely.

Preliminary data from one California school has shown promising results. The dropout rate for students who graduated from California's Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy was zero and the attendance rate was 97 percent. Most earned associates' degrees and all passed the state's high school exit exam.

For more information, go to www.earlycolleges.org.