

To a Higher Degree

Real-life stories of
progress in four
early college
high schools

KnowledgeWorks Foundation



Rethinking Education

The world is changing faster and in more ways than any of us could have imagined even a few years ago. Technology is revolutionizing everything from how we communicate and learn to how we make friends, what our jobs are like and where we live. Environmental changes threaten our health and resources; increasingly diverse and fragmented societies both enrich and divide us; and a global economy is demanding new and different skills.

This is the world our children inherit, yet our public schools have been among the slowest institutions to change. Even as the imperative grows for the next generation to become adept at critical thinking, collaboration, decision-making and problem-solving, the public education system largely has remained mired in strategies from the industrial age. In our hardest-hit areas — the urban core — some schools are ill equipped to teach children even those outdated skills.

At KnowledgeWorks Foundation, we believe the time has come to rethink education — to reimagine what and how we teach, including everything from what a classroom is to what a teacher's role should be. We are actively involved in helping educators, policymakers, business leaders and the public anticipate and prepare our schools for a future that is already beginning to take shape.

One thing is certain: Tomorrow's adults will need more education to succeed. It is no longer adequate for students to enter the workforce with nothing more than a high school diploma — and it is intolerable that we allow large numbers to drop out before graduating.

The new high schools profiled in this publication are pioneering innovative ways to reach teenagers. They are smaller, more personal and more demanding. They offer students material that is relevant for their lives, connect ideas and skills across subject areas, and give students hands-on, real-world experiences.

Even these first steps toward a radically different education system are remarkably difficult, given the scale and complexity of the problems. But they are first steps, and they are essential to our progress. We applaud these educators and students, and all those who support them, as they move bravely into the future.



Chad P. Wick, President & CEO
KnowledgeWorks Foundation

On the cover, from top:

Uland Ralston, Lorain County Early
College High School

April Rios, Toledo Early College
High School

Bob Murphy, Africentric Early
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With the help of visionary educators, students in early college high schools defy expectations



Students as young as 14 or 15 divide their days between a demanding high school curriculum and college classes — where they sit next to high school graduates and do the same work.

They are barely into their teenage years. They come from homes where money is tight and advantages few. Their parents did not graduate from college, and until now these youngsters have not been top students.

And yet they are taking — and passing — college courses. Some are making the dean's list. Some are earning associate degrees. A few have earned more than three years of college credits by the time they finish high school.

The students in Ohio's first early college high schools are defying expectations. These students who might not have otherwise been considered college material are attending high school and college at the same time, and succeeding at both.

They are jumpstarting their futures, thanks to an innovative approach to high school being pioneered in Ohio by KnowledgeWorks Foundation and its partners in urban public school districts across the state.

The early college model makes it possible for students who may not have aspired to college or who can't afford tuition to earn college credit during high school. A collaboration between local school districts and colleges, these schools are often situated right on campus. Students as young as 14 or 15 divide their days between a demanding high school curriculum and college classes — where they sit next to high school graduates and do the same work.

In return for this intensive effort, the students can earn an associate degree or 60 hours — or more — of college credit that can be applied toward a bachelor's degree. To accommodate this ambitious goal, students can opt to spend five years in high school. When they graduate, they are already qualified for a far better paying job or are well on their way to a four-year degree.

Early college high schools target students who are from disadvantaged homes and who would be the first in their families to attend college. To help

these motivated but sometimes underperforming learners, the schools are small enough so that students can work closely with instructors who not only teach core high school classes but also provide support and guidance to help them adjust to college expectations.

An outgrowth of other programs that offer students early access to college, the idea has gained traction as the need for a better-educated workforce has grown. Since 2001, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other partners have invested \$124 million nationally to support the creation of more than 170 early college high schools in 25 states. The first three early college high schools in the initiative opened their doors in 2002; by 2008 some 65,000 students are expected to attend early college high schools.

KnowledgeWorks Foundation was among the first to act on the potential of the early college high schools. The first Ohio early college high school, now known as Dayton Early College Academy, opened in 2003. Six were up and running by 2005, and two more were set to open in fall 2007.

Many of these schools have thrown out the old rule book and designed structure and curriculum with their special missions in mind. Some have eliminated the traditional yearly promotions from grade to grade and instead ask students to demonstrate their mastery of subject matter through a series of assessment gateways. Some make use of project-based instruction or emphasize cross-curricular learning.

They are always evolving and always facing difficult decisions. In one city, school leaders introduced a first-year academy to better prepare incoming students — trading off a fully integrated student community in doing so. In another, they reluctantly decided to ask students whose work didn't meet minimal standards, even after intense interventions, to leave.

And they are buffeted by outside forces. In one district, adjusting the



These schools target students who would be the first in their families to attend college.

school's calendar to match the year-round schedule of its college partner contributed to high teacher turnover. In another, a failed levy put the early college's survival on the line.

However, progress is clearly being made. In the KnowledgeWorks initiative's first six early college high schools, preliminary indications of success had begun to emerge by winter 2007. Students had earned more than 3,800 college credits by that time. Fifty-nine percent had successfully earned some college credit by the end of their first year, and 70 percent had earned college credits by the second year. At least 94 percent passed the reading, writing and math portions of the Ohio Graduation Test on their first try.

As impressive as they are, those results tell only part of the story. Behind the numbers are people: a principal who pulls together a team of teachers she had no say in hiring, a teacher who adjusts his proven classroom style to meet the needs of young college students, a student who welcomes high expectations after having been written off at a "last-chance" school for high-risk students.

Administrators, teachers, students — at early college high schools, all are defying expectations. ■

Dayton Early College Academy Dayton, Ohio

Dayton Early College Academy opened in 2003 as one of 21 new early college high schools in the country. A joint partnership between Dayton Public Schools and the University of Dayton, DECA combined high school and college instruction. It replaced traditional grades, courses and schedules with personalized, interest-driven learning experiences linked to state standards and assessed in terms of students' proficiency.

DECA's potential and early achievements earned the school national attention, including a multiyear study by the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. In the school's first year, strong student-teacher relationships quickly developed, attendance soared to a remarkable 95 percent and 22 students successfully completed 33 college courses at both UD and Sinclair Community College, also a key partner of the school.

By the time DECA was entering its fourth year in fall 2006, the school continued to evolve rapidly, adding structure and adapting programs to meet the needs of its growing

student body. Although Dayton rose a remarkable two levels in 2006 district academic ratings released by the Ohio Department of Education, many students still arrived at DECA with tremendous skill and knowledge gaps. Finding ways to serve both average and high-achieving students, while helping the many who struggled with academic obstacles and equally troubling challenges in their personal lives, demanded the staff's constant innovation and tireless dedication.

With the promise of the school's first graduation in May and the launch of a rigorous new First Year Academy for incoming freshmen, DECA seemed poised for success. Even so, scrutiny of the school promised to be more intense than ever, with expectations among supporters and skeptics alike threatening to eclipse the accomplishments of what remained, in essence, an ambitious experiment still in the early stages of its evolution.



Going to college is a primary goal and explicit expectation of every student at Dayton Early College Academy.

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A Fresh Start

First-year academy eases transition for incoming students, including one determined to turn her life around

Class Acts

Two newcomers discover the unique demands of teaching in an early college high school

By Phil Neal

Jonathan Platt could play a teacher in a movie. With his round, boyish face, stocky frame, scholarly glasses and collection of conservative shirts and ties, he seems the Hollywood archetype of a high school teacher — an educational everyman.

Ironically, this prototypical image could be a disadvantage in Platt's new position as a language arts teacher at Dayton Early College Academy (DECA), an innovative public school striving to reinvent and reinvigorate urban education.

Seven years at a charter middle school in New York City have prepared him well to help students with tremendous skill and knowledge gaps master a rigorous high school curriculum and prepare for success in college. But DECA requires its staff to go well beyond the role of traditional, or even exceptional, classroom teachers. As advisers, they have to get personally involved with students and their families, acting as both advocate and authority figure for young people who may otherwise lack both.

At first, Platt finds the transition to teaching at DECA as natural as returning to the Dayton area, where he attended college. But DECA doesn't have the same discipline issues he encountered in his previous school, so

Platt's initially stern classroom style, necessary and effective in New York, can seem needlessly confrontational.

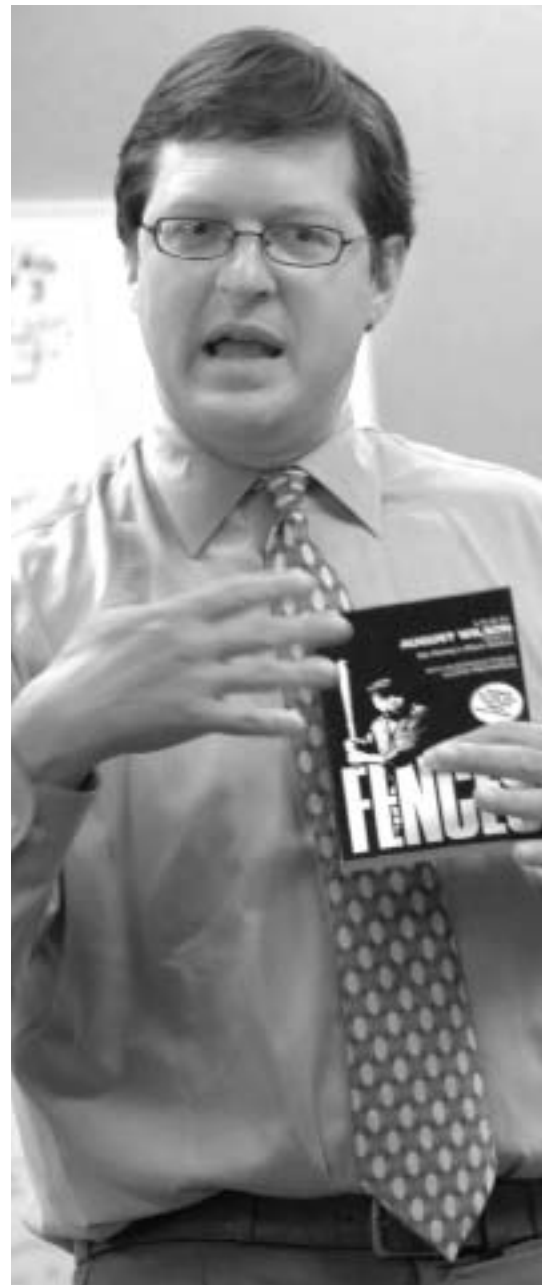
Even when he changes tactics and shows a softer side or attempts to lighten the mood, Platt's dry wit and deadpan delivery are often lost on students. Lessons tend to go well because Platt combines a strong focus on the basics of reading and writing with innovative teaching methods learned through years of workshops at Columbia University Teachers College and other prestigious institutions. Forging those vital personal relationships, though, remains a frustratingly elusive goal — until he agrees to become a fashion guinea pig.

One afternoon in September, a group from the weekly student news show "Wat's Crackin'" arrives at Platt's classroom to film a mock "personal makeover" segment called "Pimp My Advisor." The reporter shows Platt his proposed new wardrobe: outrageous '70s attire from a local thrift store, including a disco shirt, oversized sunglasses and a floor-length faux fur coat.

Pulling a bright red, wide-brimmed hat from the shopping bag, Platt casually remarks, "Well, I have several like this at home."

"Oh, for real?" the reporter replies, in all sincerity.

When Platt dons the complete outfit and struts the hallways like a living caricature of funk gone wrong, many at



Language arts teacher Jonathan Platt focuses on the basics of reading and writing, adapting the innovative teaching methods he learned during seven years in New York City to fit DECA.

“I felt like I could make more of an impact with the kids because I could do things differently.”

— *Teacher Debbie Carter*

DECA get their first true glimpse of his personality.

Approaching a stunned Dr. Judy Hennessey, DECA principal, Platt drawls, “Yo, wassup, mama?”

Hennessey shakes with laughter and backs away. Platt shrugs and addresses his entourage, a pair of students in vintage tracksuits, leather jackets and sunglasses.

“We’re gonna fly and never come back. We gotta fly or die. Or...” He

trails off a moment, thinking, then continues, “any other kind of strange metaphor I can think of. Word up.”

When the segment airs during the advisory period the following Friday, Platt’s antics obviously shock and delight his students. What remains to be seen is whether he can continue to break down barriers and earn the trust of the young people whose success at DECA — and beyond — may depend on him.



Across the building, fellow new teacher Debbie Carter is leading a discussion in her World History class. A thin woman whose fashionable clothes and glasses, close-cropped hair and patient gaze give her a sophisticated air, Carter has a natural rapport with her students. Despite being new to the profession, having left a successful career in journalism and public relations to pursue a passion for connecting kids with history, she is already a DECA veteran. As part of her master’s degree program at the University of Dayton, she spent a year at the school as a graduate assistant and student teacher.

“I like to tell people that I feel like DECA chose me,” Carter says. After experiences in large traditional public schools, DECA “was like a breath of fresh air ... I felt like I could make more of an impact with the kids because I could do things differently. I could get to know them more, one on one.”

In fact, she was so drawn to the school, she says, that “I told my husband, ‘If I don’t get hired on at DECA, then I’m going back to PR.’”

Despite her enthusiasm and her first-hand experience with the school, the demands of teaching at DECA are taking an unexpected toll.

Carter says, “The amount of work is probably the biggest surprise. I never knew how hard teachers worked. This is probably the hardest job I’ve ever done — and the lowest paid.”

On this day, she walks among students while they take notes during a slide show on World War I, asking and answering



Jonathan Platt discusses indicators with student Brittany Gamble. Rather than letter grades, DECA measures students’ proficiency in specific skills linked to state academic standards.



questions. Amid banter and laughter, Carter guides discussion on the causes of the war, including the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. A single incident involving a handful of individuals, she explains, provided the spark that ignited a global conflict.

“So if they would have just stayed home ...” a boy says, tentatively.

“That’s right,” Carter says. “It could have changed the course of history.”

This is exactly the kind of moment that led Carter to leave a lucrative, well-established career to start over in a demanding and often thankless new field.

“One of the reasons I wanted to go into teaching,” she explains, “is because I never had a good social studies teacher.” Carter hopes to do better, “to engage these kids, making (history) relevant, making it interesting, finding something about it that kind of gets them excited.”

After a few months in the classroom, her efforts clearly seem to be paying off, but she sometimes wonders about her ability to keep up with the enormous workload. With four children and a husband at home, she tries to get as

much done at school as possible so she can focus on family time when she leaves. This often means staying late, coming in early or going to school on the weekends. Even so, she still frequently has papers to grade or lessons to prepare after her kids go to bed.

“Fortunately for me,” she says, “I don’t sleep much anyway.”

“It’s ongoing,” she adds. “Sometimes I feel like I’m ahead of the curve, then other days I feel like there’s always something I could be doing ... Even now, there are days when things get really bad, or a unit doesn’t go as I expected it to, when I question whether I made the right choice about giving up that career and coming to this one.”



By spring, Platt has stronger connections with his students, who have learned to appreciate his droll style and, to some extent, his intense efforts on their behalf. He has elicited remarkably strong work from them, including deeply moving memoirs they

History teacher Debbie Carter helps student Amber Beavers polish a thank-you note to a community partner. Required internships, job shadows and community service are all part of the DECA experience.

refined through a series of five drafts and presented in a public reading at the University of Dayton. Students have read a great deal, choosing their own books and exploring literary elements through class discussion.

On any given day, though, keeping them focused and covering the material he has planned can be a challenge. During a lesson on foreshadowing, he moves constantly among small groups of students, trying to keep them on task. A little later, when it's clear many students are struggling, he tries to offer an example.

"That doesn't make any sense," a boy tells him.

"OK, then skip it," Platt says. "If you don't get it, then move on. But here's a really good one."

The boy laughs at something his neighbor says, and Platt leaves to help a girl clamoring for his attention.

"Mr. Platt, come back. I want to know what you're talking about."

"Did you read the story?" Platt asks in frustration.

"I know I didn't learn a thing from it."

"Why is this so hard?" Platt asks.

Once the class ends, Platt reflects on why things went wrong.

"Sometimes it's seamless and they just get it," he says, but "this wasn't good. Very little work got done."

Rather than lash out at the students or bemoan a bad experience, he considers his own role in the lesson and ways to improve the outcome next time. After years in the classroom, he still takes nothing for granted, including his own expertise.

"Maybe I'll try tomorrow with the same story and a different graphic organizer," he says. "As I develop as a teacher, I'll see a better place to put 'Harrison Bergeron,' and I'll have better stories for foreshadowing."



In April, Platt's humor finds its full expression when he's enlisted as a last-minute critic at the second annual Eye4Film DECA film festival. Platt's mandate is to be DECA's version of *American Idol*'s Simon Cowell, offering blunt, though entertaining critiques. He plays the role with absurd, comic perfection.

After a film about a teenage mother, the first two panel members compliment the filmmaker on a touching, realistic, but uplifting portrait.

In a low, serious voice, Platt counters, "I liked it, but somebody needs to get that baby some acting lessons."

Following a film on organ donation he declares, still in a slow monotone, "I was so moved that I'm going to give you my liver, pancreas and intestines. After the show. In a baggie."

The audience roars with each new observation, all delivered in the same matter-of-fact tone. Even with the obvious role-playing, it seems clear that students have come to know and accept Platt for who he is.

This new acceptance extends to the classroom as well, where stronger connections with his students now make Platt's innovative lesson plans more effective. During a unit on reader's theater, he steps into the hallway to work with a trio rehearsing a scene from August Wilson's play *Fences*. With a deft touch for suggestion and an occasional demonstration, Platt helps the students understand and truly inhabit their characters.

"She always points to the things that you feel are wrong about you," he tells one student, "so always be a little defensive with her ... Everything she brings up is right, but it's wrong to you because you can't fix it."

"Never, never let us see your back," Platt adds, "And there's nothing more distracting than actors shuffling their feet."

He offers a little more advice, then asks to see the dialogue again. This time, the students nail every line.



Principal Judy Hennessey helps graduating senior Jasmyne Ahmad prepare for a presentation in New York City. DECA students and faculty frequently share their experiences with others interested in education reform.

Back in the classroom, he checks in with the other groups. The performances have really brought out the best in some students, Platt says, engaging them to an extent that surprised him. Even when a class goes this well, though, he can't help but look for ways to make it better.

"I like directing them and helping them out," he says, "but I can't do (the groups) all together. I should have done one ensemble piece, now that I think about it... I'll have to retweak it again."

He's already looking forward to next year.



As spring arrives, Debbie Carter has also hit her stride.

"I still feel new at this," she says, "but I think I've finally got somewhat of a routine. I'm doing a better job of balancing everything that's required of me. I'm managing it better — the workload here and my role in life."

She smiles and admits, "I'm sleeping better."

"Maybe one or two nights a week, I can actually leave here and not have to take things home to work on. Then I can actually be a wife and mother when I get home."

Unfortunately, just as Carter is adjusting to her new career, everything is in jeopardy. In January, Dayton Public Schools announced an unexpected budget shortfall of \$30 million. A levy on the May 8 ballot is the only chance to avoid school closings, serious programming reductions and staff cuts as high as 30 percent — including 300 teachers. Based on seniority in the district, most of DECA's young staff will be vulnerable, and new teachers such as Carter and Platt will be the first to feel the axe.

"My future here at DECA is uncertain," Carter concedes, "but I think that I have found that I love (teaching). If I'm not teaching at DECA, I would try to find a position somewhere else."

Somberly, she adds, "If I end up leaving, everything will be measured in terms of how I did it at DECA ... From here on out, this will be my benchmark, wherever I go."

On election day, voters reject the levy, 58 percent to 42 percent. When

the results become clear, Superintendent Dr. Percy Mack sets expectations for dramatic and painful changes throughout the district: "There is not one area that won't be touched."

At DECA the following day, emotions run high as students and teachers contemplate the strong possibility of losing everything they have worked four years to build. No one can focus in class, and rumors about DECA's fate spread wildly.

In the weeks following the election, local, state and national leaders speak out in support of the district, and many pointedly mention DECA. Numerous articles and editorials, all praising DECA's accomplishments and advocating for its survival, run in the local and national media, including *The New York Times*.

On May 30, as the school's historic first commencement is set to begin, no one knows what the future holds. For one evening, though, anxiety takes a back seat to joy. The experiment begun four years ago with such high aspirations has finally yielded its first fundamental measure of success: 32 graduating seniors, each bound for college in the fall. Seven completed enough college courses to earn an associate degree along with their high school diploma. Nearly all of them won scholarships, including several full rides. In total, they have received well over



Students MoniQue Stewart and Jasmine Green enjoy a free moment during their lunch period.

\$2 million in scholarships and grants, a remarkable average of more than \$62,000 per student.

No one directly mentions the threat looming over DECA, but Hennessey delivers an emotional address. In reviewing the accomplishments of the graduates, she pauses several times as the audience cheers and applauds. She describes how the seniors have traveled all over the nation and to several other countries, both to enrich their education and to share their experiences at the vanguard of education reform.

More than all of these invaluable experiences, and beyond even the financial rewards of their diligent work, she concludes, "most importantly, you set a precedent for high achievement, class of 2007, in establishing a mentoring culture where students help each other learn."

"You taught us all a new way of going to high school."



In the final two weeks of the school year, DECA seems quieter. It could be due to the notable absence of the 32 graduates. It could be uncertainty, the

“We’re just starting to hit our stride.”

— *Principal Judy Hennessey*

burden of working harder than ever without knowing whether the work will soon be undone. It might simply be the bone-deep fatigue of shepherding the school’s first graduating class, its new first-year academy and two other cohorts of students through so many milestones. Whatever the reason, teachers and students alike are eager for summer to arrive.

Jonathan Platt is ready for a break, but he’s committed to return in the fall — and confident the school will still be open to welcome him back.

“I’m trying not to stress over it,” he says of the daily changing plans and prognosis. “It’s so intangible.”

Fortunately, his wife recently started a

teaching job in another district. Platt is pleased at the prospect of two incomes for the family, but in a worst-case scenario, it’s reassuring to know they will still have one.

For Debbie Carter, the final day of school will be especially poignant because, come what may, it will be her last at DECA. Shortly after the election, she accepted an offer to teach outside the district. Her feelings about DECA haven’t changed, but she felt compelled to choose the stability of the new position, for herself and her family.

“I love it here,” she says. “I had no desire to leave whatsoever, but I’ve got kids, three of them going to college in three years. It was a hard decision for me

and my husband.”

Every day, Platt, Carter and the rest of the DECA staff receive new updates from Hennessey. Facts are few and fluid, but she continues to encourage optimism. DECA’s future remains still brighter than its past, she insists.

“I think we’ve had a lot of evolution, and we’re just starting to hit our stride,” she says. “We’re just on the cusp of that.”

Given a few more years, a stay of execution to allow this innovative experiment to continue, she believes DECA will discover — and demonstrate — still more effective ways to address the complex challenges involved in urban public education.

Success and publicity don’t provide immunity from the harsh realities of budget cuts, she admits, but adds: “I think there’s a lot of commitment to keep DECA intact, and (preserve) the integrity of the program. I believe we will survive this.”

Epilogue

In mid-June, shortly after the final day of classes for the year, the Dayton Board of Education released DECA to leave the district and become an independent charter school. The district planned to sponsor the school and to work closely with the University of Dayton to support the transition.



Members of DECA’s first graduating class celebrate during commencement in May. All 32 graduates will enter college in fall 2007, and the class earned more than \$2 million in grants and scholarships.

A Fresh Start

First-year academy eases transition for incoming students, including one determined to turn her life around



By Phil Neal

On a sweltering morning in mid-June, Marissa Meredith arrives at the Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) for freshman orientation. A thin, pale girl with her dark hair pulled back in a severe bun, Marissa seems more intent on the lectures and lessons, less uncomfortable with the demands outlined by the DECA faculty, than many of her fellow students.

Like Marissa, the other 60 or so teenagers in attendance have accepted, albeit often grudgingly, the prospect of three full days of simulated school during the first week of summer vacation. This is the price of admission for those who hope to attend this unique public school, which offers a safe and supportive environment, strong academics and a chance to earn extensive college credit while working toward a high school diploma.

For Marissa, the drive to enroll in a school like DECA is still more urgent: she wants a better life for her daughter.

“I don’t want her to have to go through the things I went through,” she says firmly, without elaborating. Being apart from Neveah, who was born less than a month before the orientation, is hard, but Marissa knows education is the key to her goals.

“My daughter motivates me,” she writes in an early entry in her school journal, “because if I do not succeed, how can I expect my daughter to?”

Before Neveah was born, Marissa attended a charter school for high-risk students. She didn’t like being segregated with a group of new or expectant teen mothers, and she rankled under the low expectations everyone had for her.

The school was considered “a last-chance school,” Marissa says, “but I was getting straight A’s, so I was not a last-chance student.”

A difficult pregnancy and the anxiety of preparing for parenthood offered ready excuses for losing focus, but Marissa stayed on track with her schoolwork.

“When I was nine-months pregnant, my GPA was 3.8.”

That same determination is evident during her orientation, which is both a demanding preview of DECA life and a chance for the faculty to personally evaluate prospective students.

“They were preparing us for college before we even walked in the door,” Marissa says. “You had to have letters of recommendation, and tests, and an essay, and you had to come interview.”

Given all the strict requirements, Marissa says, “getting into DECA was a little like getting into college.”

Marissa Meredith saw early college as a chance to pursue her goals, realize her potential and shake off the stigma of being labeled a “last-chance student.”





Like DECA itself, student Jasmine Green has experienced dramatic changes since the school opened in 2003. Returning for a fifth year will give her a chance to recover from missteps and build on her achievements.

Three years before Marissa Meredith attended orientation, Jasmine Green's first days at DECA began in a similar way, though her experience quickly took a different course.

As a member of DECA's charter class in fall 2003, Jasmine enrolled in a school that was more concept than institution, all vision and potential without structure or tradition. During her orientation, students and staff met at a rural YMCA camp to get to know one another and begin dreaming up ideas for their new school.

The following week, DECA officially opened its doors, although in reality, the school didn't have a door to call its own. The University of Dayton had agreed to share facilities and other resources with the startup school, but classes met all over campus. The courses themselves were just as fluid, using student interests as the basis for creative learning

experiences incorporating key skills from core academic subjects.

DECA today bears little resemblance to the startup from three years ago. The school has a permanent home in a former office building adjacent to the UD campus, fixed class schedules and curricula each semester, and strict academic requirements.

Jasmine is glad to have endured DECA's growing pains.

"I wouldn't say I've had any bad experiences," she says. "I think I've changed, I've adapted well ... I believe that I progressed right with them, because I was once lost, too."

With expressive eyes, a broad smile and a steady, expectant gaze, Jasmine has an engaging presence often undercut by shyness or self-doubt. She is typically eager to please and quick to apologize, but she can also speak passionately and

with simple eloquence. Like DECA itself, she has changed and grown a great deal, but she also continues to face significant challenges.

By the beginning of her senior year in August, Jasmine has passed just two gateways, the comprehensive, individualized performance reviews that DECA requires rather than annual, credit-based promotion. Still more troubling, during the first few weeks of school she fails her third gateway.

"I chose to do something else other than work," she admits. When her last-minute scramble to prepare didn't succeed, "I was on thin ice ... and, thank God, they showed mercy. They saw that I had potential here."

Jasmine quickly realizes the full impact of her misstep: she won't be able to graduate this year.

"Teachers were telling me" to work harder all along, she says, "but until I fell and took that hard fall on my own ... That was when I woke up and realized for myself that I didn't make the right choices."

Fortunately, an opportunity exists to make things right. Because it combines high school and college coursework, DECA allows students who want or need extra time to complete graduation requirements to return for a fifth year.

"Honestly, I feel kind of bad about it," she says. "I feel upset because I want to be ahead. And then again, I feel like I need the challenge, like I need to stay."

An additional year can provide the second chance Jasmine needs, but the prospect of months of difficult work and the need for a new level of dedication raise a worrisome question: Will this last chance be enough?



Midway through the year, Marissa has already delivered her first exhibition, a detailed presentation of an in-depth research project, and in early January she passes her first gateway. First-year students are only required to achieve

this milestone by the end of the year, but Marissa has no plans to slow down.

Her early success is doubtless due in large part to her intelligence and dedication, but she also has an advantage Jasmine lacked: the new First Year Academy (FYA) program. Marissa and her fellow first-year students are divided into several small groups, segregated by gender and taught by a corps of four dedicated teachers. Coursework focuses on core subjects and essential skills for success, including effective study habits, time management, goal setting, reading, writing and personal accountability.

Although some students complain about the FYA, Marissa finds it helpful.

Even more than the small, single-sex classes, she likes the “positive environment, focused on academics. The teachers are tough on us. They try to act like they don’t love us, but deep down they do.”

In particular, Marissa’s adviser, language arts teacher Elizabeth Cameron, “is like an older sister to me.”

“Getting into DECA was a little like getting into college.”

– *Student Marissa Meredith*

DECA encourages close, personal relationships between advisers and students, but the comparison is especially appropriate in this case. Like many DECA faculty members, Cameron is relatively young, and Marissa is older than most FYA students because of a large gap in her earlier education.

Marissa says, “After seventh grade I withdrew. I just stopped going to school.”

For the next two years, she spent her time partying with older friends. She abused alcohol, experimented with drugs and had no plans for the future.

“When I found out I was pregnant,”

she says, everything changed. “I realized I had to grow up and stop doing the stuff I was doing.”

“I was shocked at first,” she says. “I was scared because I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I didn’t know what kind of effects (pregnancy) would have on my body or on my mental state, and I basically didn’t know how to take care of a child.”

With the support of her fiancé, Marissa slowly adjusted to the idea of having a baby and began the difficult work of getting her life in order.

“I started going back to school when I was four-months pregnant,” she says. She worked hard, despite her dislike of the “last-chance” charter school, and then leapt at the opportunity to attend DECA.

“She’s very driven,” Cameron says. “She wants to do law, and she could. She really could.”

All the talent and drive in the world may not be enough, though. Marissa is emancipated from her parents, lives with her fiancé in a subsidized apartment and has often held multiple jobs just to stay ahead of the bills, all while trying to keep up with schoolwork and parenting.

“We struggle with all the complications of why kids don’t engage,” Principal Judy Hennessey says. “I can only imagine for some of them how bizarre our demands must seem, juggling what they are in their personal lives.”

Despite the obstacles Marissa faces, Cameron says, “I think she’ll at least graduate high school, which I don’t think would have happened at another school. I think DECA’s the right place for her.”



First-year student Marissa Meredith meets daily with her adviser, language arts teacher Elizabeth Cameron. Advisers develop close relationships with students and their families to help students succeed at DECA and prepare for college.



“I chose the right high school.
I made the right choice.”

– *Student Jasmine Green*

As she pushes toward her diploma, Jasmine Green realizes how much hard work awaits her. She is confident that DECA offers the structure and support she needs to succeed — and a clear expectation that she will do so.

At the end of March, when Marissa attempts to pass her second gateway, Cameron seems as anxious and excited as her student. Addressing a three-member faculty panel, Marissa quickly and precisely reviews the gateway requirements and demonstrates how she has fulfilled each one.

Midway through her presentation, her father and her fiancé, who is carrying Neveah, quietly come in and take seats at the edge of the room. Marissa’s concentration doesn’t slip until her daughter sees her and gleefully calls out, “Mama!”

For just a moment, Marissa’s no-nonsense veneer cracks. She laughs,

her whole face alive with joy, and looks away from her notes to the tiny form of her daughter nestled in her fiancé’s arms.

When the presentation ends, the panel reviews Marissa’s documentation and discusses her work. Apart from a few missing parent signatures and some minor edits, they agree she has done a fine job. Marissa is one third of the way toward earning a high school diploma, and one step closer to college.



By May, Jasmine has hit her stride. With consistent hard work,

punctuated by a few brief setbacks, she has managed to pass her third gateway and is on track to complete another before the year ends.

On the afternoon of her fourth exhibition, Jasmine faces an unusually large audience, in part because she personally invited so many people, including Hennessey and Dr. Tom Lasley, dean of education at the University of Dayton and a tireless supporter of DECA from its earliest days.

When everyone is ready, Jasmine confidently begins her presentation. For the next 45 minutes, she provides a thorough introduction to breast cancer, including its causes, courses, types and treatments. For the most part, her delivery is engaging, and her command of the material is clear.

After the applause dies down, Hennessey commends her for tackling a difficult topic with great mastery and maturity, and she points out that Jasmine’s exhibition is one of the most substantial ever presented at DECA. Lasley and adviser Becky Aicher point out Jasmine’s remarkable progress since her first, very rough attempt at an exhibition nearly two years earlier.

“You have come a long way since that day,” Aicher tells her.

“You should be proud of yourself,” Hennessey adds. “You have worked so hard, and you earned every bit of this.”

Jasmine answers each compliment with a shy smile or soft word of thanks, but she knows a great deal of work still awaits her, including her fourth gateway

in a few weeks and two more to follow. For the moment, at least, she is strongly focused on her goals.

Rather than return for a full year in the fall, she says, “I want to graduate in December, because there are other things that I want to do with my life.”

After graduation, she plans to study communications and political science at Sinclair Community College, then transfer to the University of Dayton, where she will also study music.

Finishing her final two gateways while preparing for college will be a stretch, she admits, but she is determined to rise to the challenge. In fact, she has already begun work on her autobiography, a requirement for the sixth gateway. Writing her life story has been a surprisingly moving and illuminating process.

“It gave me a different perspective,” she says, “Had I not written this, I would have still looked at things the same way and used everything I went through as an excuse.”

Jasmine’s story includes numerous harrowing experiences, including extreme poverty, incidents of abuse, being homeless at the age of 5, and separating from and reuniting with her brother several times while living with various relatives. By the time she was 12, Jasmine had been through so much that she contemplated suicide.

Even so, she says, “when I was rereading everything, I saw that I didn’t go through much. I had a story, but I didn’t really experience anything tragic. It wasn’t that bad. There’s people that have gone through worse, because I’m still here. I’m still alive.

“I have support from my teachers, my family, even people I don’t know who look at me from afar and see something in me. That leaves no excuse why I should not become successful.”



Students Marissa Meredith and Dioncia Black discuss an assignment in one of DECA's computer labs. Course work routinely incorporates technology to support learning.

During the final weeks of school, Marissa is consumed by a new personal crisis. In April, her fiancé was convicted for an act of vandalism committed years earlier and sentenced to six months in a county jail. Marissa is bearing up under this latest burden with her same stoic determination, but going without his help and support, and trying to manage his appeal while juggling everything else, is taking its toll.

Cameron notices the difference. Marissa’s fiancé, she says, “is honestly the most competent, stable person in her life right now.”

Despite the distractions, Marissa manages to keep her grades up, pass her final exams and complete her third exhibition before school ends. Over the summer, she will study for and take the Ohio Graduation Test, paving the way for her to pass her third gateway when school resumes in August.

Assuming she can achieve these goals, she’ll be halfway to a diploma entering her second year of high school. Rather than graduate early, though, Marissa plans to complete the remaining three gateways over the course of three years, leaving her plenty of time to earn college credits and apply to college.

“I want to go to Harvard,” she says. “I may not get in, but it doesn’t hurt to apply.”

Jasmine, too, is hopeful for the future. Even facing the prospect of an extra semester or two at DECA, she insists, “I chose the right high school. I made the right choice.

“DECA is challenging people,” she says, “who feel like they have no opportunity or less opportunity. Challenging people ... who want to make a difference.

“I say we need more DECAs around the world.”



About the storyteller

Phil Neal is a freelance writer and editor whose clients include several Fortune 50 companies, as well as leaders in

the healthcare, education and nonprofit sectors. He lives in Dayton with his wife, son, and feline office staff and can be reached via www.textwell.com.

Toledo Early College High School **Toledo, Ohio**

In Toledo Early College High School's second year, the addition of a second cohort of students and staff presented a challenge for teachers who in the first year were able to focus mostly on building an imaginative and challenging curriculum. The central question became how to bring structure to Toledo Early College while maintaining its unique mission of preparing 14- and 15-year-olds for college classes.

For the first time, logistical questions such as how college credit hours would translate to high school credits became serious issues. Parents wanted to know if students who received evaluations in high school classes instead of grades would be taken seriously by college admission boards outside Ohio.

Interpreting ambiguities of a strict dress code became a problem for teachers who were used to looser restrictions the year before. A few college administrators raised concerns about high school students left unsupervised between classes.

As Toledo Early College accommodated its growing pains, teachers became concerned about the school retaining its unique character and spirit while navigating the transition from educational experiment to established institution.



As she enters her last year of teaching, Paulette Dewey wants to make sure the new school she helped found is strong enough to survive.

on page 24



Culture Shock

Members of school's founding class have to adjust their expectations and their work habits

Growing Pains

Year Two brings more students and more structure, but teachers retain some of their startup spirit

By Larry Levy

On the second day of school, Toledo Early College social studies teacher Randy Nissen is relaxed and confident as he sits in his classroom among vintage posters and historic pictures. Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King Jr. still look over his students as they did the year before.

But Nissen, one of four teachers who made up the entire staff in the school's first year, wonders whether the honeymoon is over. This year the school must integrate 90 additional students and manage the logistics of a growing program. Many more kids will be enrolled in college classes; four new teachers and a new principal have joined the staff.

English teacher Paulette Dewey has her own concerns. After 26 years of teaching, this will be her last year before retirement. She wants to make sure the school will be strong enough to survive while fulfilling its mission. She is equally determined that Toledo Early College keep its charm and unique personality as it formalizes its structure.

An early sign that things have changed comes at a staff meeting where a new districtwide dress code is emphasized. Both teachers are more than skeptical about the benefits of expelling a student for a transgression such as not having his shoelaces match. Policing such rules could be more time-consuming and distracting than worthwhile — especially since Toledo

“Structure will make us *stronger* in the long run.”

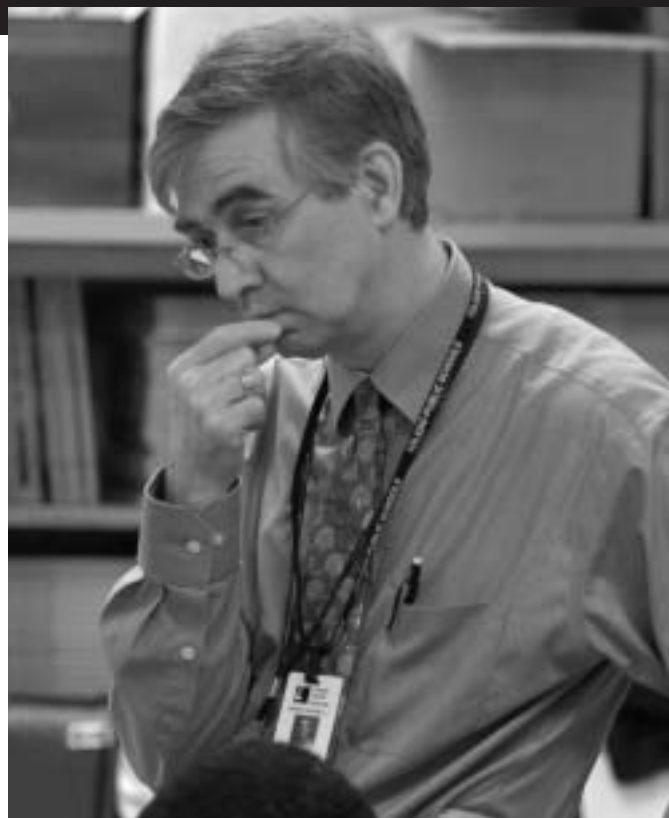
— *Teacher Randy Nissen*

Early College students can wear whatever they like for college classes. This is only one of several issues confronting the staff as it formalizes policies and procedures that were lesser priorities during the initial excitement of creating a new school.

“We are having to become so much like other Toledo Public Schools,” Dewey says to Nissen. “If it’s a systemwide rule, then I believe we have to follow it. But it’s OK to ask why it’s a rule in the first place. Just as I don’t expect us to be put in the big-box mold, I don’t expect us to lose our eccentric qualities, either.”

“It was a lot looser last year,” Nissen says. “This kind of uniformity wasn’t a priority. But I know that structure will make us stronger in the long run.”

Last year, Dewey and Nissen enjoyed ample time to design innovative lessons.





Teacher Paulette Dewey discusses strategies for an essay project with students Justin Brockway and Jamie Sauders.

After many years of teaching within the constraints of big-box urban high schools, Toledo Early College freed them to design cross-curricular projects limited only by their imaginations.

They moved so freely between their disciplines that students sometimes forgot whether they were in a social studies or English class. America's Roaring '20s came alive through old newsreels, jazz performances, *The Great Gatsby*, the social history of fashion and automobiles, early 20th-century paintings, the politics of isolationism, women's rights and prohibition. Students were coaxed, inspired and prodded to complete their own research so they'd be engaged in the learning process.

As Dewey and Nissen try to find time to plan new lessons during their second year in the face of the more complicated logistics of a larger school, they are committed to preserving the collaboration they forged in their first year.



The first challenge of doubling the student body is that the early college students are more conspicuous on

campus. They seem to get blamed for every noise in the busy college building where Toledo Early College is housed. A series of memos is distributed around campus addressing this situation. One university administrator wants Toledo Early College students to wear identifying badges. She thinks, also, that students waiting for rides home should be chaperoned. Both proposals conflict with the school's mission of integrating its students into the college's academic life.

A series of minor incidents seems to support the university administrator's position. A boy and girl are caught on security camera kissing in a study area. Three students play with the controls on an elevator during a busy time between classes and are banned from using the elevator. Several students lose their computer lab privileges after visiting inappropriate websites.

"The way (these kids) act wouldn't even register at a regular high school, because they are just acting like goofy teenagers," Nissen says at a meeting to discuss consequences for the students.

Dewey also thinks criticism of student behavior is overblown, but believes the school's small size is an

“We have the opportunity to create an institution that will be strong and endure.”

— *Teacher Paulette Dewey*

advantage in dealing with such problems. “In a big high school people just shake their heads and say ‘that’s just the way it goes.’ Here we can work with individuals and catch problems before they become overwhelming.”

Dr. Robin Wheatley, Toledo Early College’s third principal, works to defuse the situation. Her background in administration and media relations serves her well.

“I’m concerned about the school being a good neighbor,” she explains one afternoon in the staff lunchroom. “The relatively minor problems we have will be resolved as we provide a more structured environment for our kids. It’s hard to be responsible for students’ behavior when they’re coming and going on city buses and college shuttles, but they have to understand that the whole university campus is their school.”

As Wheatley acknowledges that “it’s difficult for 14- and 15-year-olds to make the behavioral adjustments of going back and forth between two worlds,” she believes that their classroom success proves their ability to navigate the transition. She hopes that her plan of forming a committee to improve communication between the school and university will make a difference. Her commitment to establishing better communications relieves much of the tension and the emails critical of student behavior stop.



In January, the full staff of 10 attends a meeting that is nothing but drudgery.

They meet in a converted storage room where textbooks are stockpiled and chairs are jammed against the walls. A piece of white paper covers the door window for privacy. A typed agenda contains a long list of issues: class rankings, attendance problems, Ohio Graduation Tests, cleaning services and student recruiting. Planning innovative curriculum is put aside until “the nitty gritty is taken care of,” as Dewey says.

The meeting continues two hours past the conclusion of classes and only Wheatley remains energetic as she guides the staff through its agenda.

“There is a natural maturing process that people and institutions experience,” Dewey says. “And it is, by nature, painful. We are lucky that we have the opportunity to create an institution that will be strong and endure — and reflect

the values that brought us here.”

Both Dewey and Nissen express regret at some of the school’s changes, but they accept the inevitability of them.

When Dewey says, “it’s like the honeymoon is over, and we’re down to creating real shape to how this school needs to look,” Nissen answers that he’s concerned that too much structure might take away the fun aspects of high school. But he acknowledges the part he can play in creating an atmosphere that meets the social as well as academic needs of students.

“We make such great demands on our kids, and they don’t get to blow off steam the way other kids do. They miss the dances, sporting events and extracurriculars they’d get in their neighborhood schools. The school’s overall environment should compensate for that.”



English teacher Paulette Dewey and social studies teacher Randy Nissen are committed to preserving the collaboration that marked the school’s first year.

Both teachers are keenly aware of the benefits their school offers and its long-range potential for changing students' lives. Dewey is haunted by the memory of Leonard, a student she knew years ago at a large urban school where she taught senior English. The boy was quiet to the point of being withdrawn, and he always sat alone in the back of the classroom. More than once, Dewey promised herself she would draw him out the next time she saw him. She wanted to know the boy's potential and engage him in the learning process. Each day, however, the boy managed to blend in with the crowd and evade her personal attention. Leonard became a symbol to her of how large schools fail some of their students.

"In small schools that could never happen," Dewey says. "Things are better here because the environment is more personal. If I saw someone as quiet as that boy, I'd ask him: 'Are you OK?' If there was a problem, we'd address it. There's no place to hide in a small school."

Freshman Jasmine Calhoun is one student who couldn't hide. When she fell behind in several of her classes, her teachers set up conferences with her parents "so we could all work together on a plan for me," Jasmine explains. This safety net for students who need extra help in meeting the school's challenges "would never have happened in the school I came from," Jasmine says.



After 26 years of teaching, Paulette Dewey is still the most physical teacher any of her ninth and 10th graders has seen. She is performing dance moves from her own high school days — a variation on

the Locomotion her students call the Dewey Dance — as she slides from one end of the classroom to the other. Spring break has put Dewey in a great mood.

Thirty students smile and groan as Dewey explains the day's research assignment. The various aspects of Colonial Massachusetts' culture are broken down into components and assigned to teams who will present their research results to the whole class.

"When we're done, you'll know everything about the Puritans," Dewey says. "And you'll be excited about it."

There is no irony in Dewey's voice. Her passion for teaching is meant to be contagious.

"Learn this material and you'll understand what Arthur Miller's talking about in *The Crucible*," she tells her class.

Across the hall, Nissen has already completed a lesson on Sen. Joseph McCarthy's search for communists in the 1950s. Although Dewey and Nissen haven't been able to develop cooperative lesson plans like they did last year, these units run parallel and the two take advantage of the timing. After studying Miller's play about the Salem witch trials, Dewey will draw comparisons between America in 1700 and America in the 1950s. Nissen will bring the discussion of metaphoric witch hunts to date when his students read about the domestic war against terrorism in their current events unit.

It gives Dewey satisfaction to see that cross-curricular teaching is still possible at Toledo Early College. "That's when teaching is the most fun," she says. "When you erase the boundaries between academic disciplines, you can show how knowledge builds on itself. And students will learn to make the connections on their own."

Nissen agrees. "My fantasy is to see kids get interested in something and pursue it without our demanding it. When a kid shows me something he's read in a newspaper article that relates to a subject we've introduced to him, then



Jasmine Calhoun and her parents worked with teachers to create a plan to help her catch up after she fell behind.

teaching is very satisfying. Most kids today don't seem to be curious about things beyond their lives."

Despite the success of the unit on Puritans, the two veteran teachers are caught up in new struggles. Having students with overlapping college and high school classes is proving difficult for students and teachers. Although the kids are doing well in their college classes, it sometimes comes at the expense of missing high school work. Teachers post assignments online, on the classroom blackboard, and then hand them out on hard copy. Yet too often students say they don't know what's going on in classes they miss.

Dewey and Nissen talk about this in the hallway between classes.

"It's painful to watch these kids struggle with their commitments," Dewey says.

"And if they're our best students, what does that say about the system?" Nissen adds.

Wheatley has already addressed the scheduling situation. "A good example of growing pains," she says. "But a problem that can be solved." By starting classes earlier in the morning and refusing to allow double-scheduling, the school can accommodate more students in college classes while returning to a model more like that of the first year.



By late spring, Nissen is talking about burnout. Outside obligations and the additional demands of teaching in a new small school are taking their toll.

"I'm tired," he says. "I'm fine, but I have the year-end programs to deal with now. In a new school we have to establish traditions and procedures from scratch, so we have to think of everything that has to be done without instructions from previous years: engraving on awards, site preparation for assemblies and a picnic, coordinating with the University of Toledo, fitting



Christine Casano, center, explains an elaborate family tree she prepared for a history project to fellow student Desiree Beatty and teacher Randy Nissen.

within a budget. And the kids are so needy, they'd never leave if we didn't close the doors sometimes. One night this week I had to kick out the last kids three hours after school ended."

Nissen doesn't explain why he was working so late, too. But it's no surprise. During his much-needed spring break he took students to a museum in Cleveland, two hours away. On another day off, he and math teacher Paul Tierney investigated the curriculum of a charter school.

On top of it all, Nissen has gotten drawn into supervising standardized testing. The tests are important because their results will reflect on the success of the school. Teachers and parents are proud of the college credits earned by Toledo Early College's students, but the tests will offer a baseline comparison with other Toledo Public Schools.

Nissen hopes that two years of hard work will result in test scores that can be publicized, so everyone can appreciate what the school has accomplished.

"I dream that some day, people will speak of the school with great respect. I know it's up to us to create a place that rewards hard work. But at the same time I hope we create an atmosphere that's fun, too."

After working so hard to build a successful school, it hurts him to hear negative comments from students or parents.

He accepts parental complaints that the school needs to develop clearer policy guidelines and hopes that a new student handbook will clarify such distracting questions as whether logos on T-shirts violate the dress code or what students must achieve to earn enough credits to become a sophomore.



Paulette Dewey is encouraged by some of the changes she sees.

Dewey has similar goals for Toledo Early College. As the year nears completion, she has begun distributing her personal collection of books to students who express special interest in reading them. As she hands a favorite Jane Austen book to a ninth-grade girl, she has already begun the emotional process of looking back to evaluate what she is leaving behind. After class one day, she explains how her fears for the school's survival have been allayed.

"The best thing about teaching here has been watching so many students grow in maturity. There are students succeeding right now that we didn't think would make it last year. These are unbelievably strong kids who grew into school leaders and successful college students."

She is encouraged by some of the changes she sees. "A year ago we had to drag them to the Toledo Museum of Art for field trips. Now they ask us to take them more often."



On the last day of school, neither Dewey nor Nissen lingers in public displays of sentimentality. Dewey tells

her students the story of how she recognized Nissen's creativity when she first met him several years ago. Nissen acknowledges Dewey's "amazing teaching ability" to a group of associates.

Wheatley says that Dewey's "energy radiated out to touch children every day. She's animated and colorful in a way that couldn't be taught."

When *The (Toledo) Blade* prints a newspaper story announcing that 90 percent of Toledo Early College High School's sophomores have passed all sections of the Ohio Graduation Tests — the highest percent in the district and way higher than the largest public schools — the staff is ecstatic.

"By the time we graduate our first class (in two years)," Wheatley says, "we will be the premier school in Northwest Ohio. We will have a community and a culture that isn't experimental but established. It will reflect what this faculty has already accomplished as it respects creativity and the need to be

flexible in meeting students' needs."

With just hours left in her teaching career, Paulette Dewey steps out of her classroom and discovers a scene of utter chaos. Some 130 ravenous teenagers are pushing, shoving and reaching to get at pizza that's for sale. The hallway rocks with laughter and complaints.

Dewey steps behind the makeshift serving table and takes charge without breaking stride. She doesn't yell; she doesn't even complain. She encourages the students' energy and redirects what's supposed to be an orderly line according to her unique teaching style.

"Come on, guys. Hurry. Let's go," she says. She's slinging pizza slices the way she dished up lessons for three decades to kids starving for knowledge they didn't know existed.

Dewey's banter calms the crowd and brings order as she calls each kid by name. "Carla, what do you need?" she asks. "Here you go, sweetie. Cheese and banana peppers."



"We will be the premier school in Northwest Ohio."

— *Principal Robin Wheatley*

In 15 minutes, the entire crowd of teenagers has been served.

Nissen, Dewey's teaching partner for the past two years, rushes past the pizza tables to round up students who promised to entertain at the year-end assembly. With such a small staff, everyone has to pitch in. Wheatley is counting the pizza money. English teacher Emily Francis is cleaning up the tables.

Nissen reviews the students' script with pleasure. Its good-natured humor has precisely caught the tone and personality of the school.

Feliza, Desiree and Christina have created a long list of student traits: "You know you're a Toledo Early College student if ... it's TOTALLY upsetting that Mrs. Dewey is retiring ... staying up till 2:00 doing homework doesn't seem that extreme ... you laugh when your friends from other schools complain about their two whole worksheets of homework ... your "home school" and your ACTUAL school are two different places ... you've hung out in Mr. Nissen's room."

"They did this all in a few days!" Nissen exclaims. He is pleased, not just because the kids have demonstrated careful thought and good humor, but because their work shows how the school has evolved. In-jokes and shared routines are important to creating a school's culture.

Three days later, the Toledo Early College staff meets for a planning session followed by a year-end luncheon where Paulette Dewey accepts retirement cards and well-wishes from her colleagues. In a low-key farewell, Dewey describes how satisfying it has been to work with talented teachers who care so much about their students.

Away from the group, she elaborates on her feelings. "I believe in this program so much that I wouldn't have



Cross-curricular studies engage students like Aaron Jones, who prepared a research paper concerning popular song and societal issues.

been able to walk away from it if I didn't think the school was strong enough to survive and continue developing in the right direction. Kids are doing things here in this small schools environment that nobody is doing anywhere else. I'm so glad I'm ending my career at this school; I'm optimistic that this is the way schools should be teaching."

Principal Wheatley is also optimistic that Dewey's legacy of passionate commitment, cross-curricular team teaching, creative innovations and rigorous standards will continue.

"Paulette set the bar very high for all of us," Wheatley says. "And we will remember those standards when we interview new teacher candidates this summer — and in the future." ■

Culture Shock

Members of school's founding class have to adjust their expectations and their work habits



Popular student April Rios recovered from a difficult first semester to win recognition for her academic achievement.

By Larry Levy

Toledo Early College High School's mission is to prepare a diverse collection of students — all of whom share factors that might stand in their way of attending college — for college classes by the age of 15. It accomplishes that goal by offering individualized attention, consistent encouragement and creative teaching that refuses to compromise in its stringent demands. Those methods must reach young people of all backgrounds, abilities and personalities. One student responds immediately and happily to the demanding curriculum. Another is shocked by rigorous assignments and needs six months to adjust. A third struggles daily to succeed while refusing to give up her ambitious goals. Toledo Early College must meet each student's needs in unique ways, as the experiences of two second-year students demonstrate.

April Rios

When April Rios' English teacher, Emily Francis, called her mother, April "freaked." She'd had a rough first year at Toledo Early College High School, but she was trying hard as a sophomore, and it wasn't fair that she should be in trouble.

Francis' message, however, was different than April expected.

"I was just calling to tell you what a wonderful daughter you have," Francis told April's mother. She had noticed



Student April Rios “is a real success story,” says teacher Emily Francis.

how April befriended a freshman who hadn’t yet made friends at his new school, and she was impressed by the positive impact this had on others accepting him. Francis wanted April’s mother to know all the ways April had grown since she first began at Early College.

“April is a real success story,” Francis said.

That success story didn’t have an easy beginning, April acknowledges while speaking openly about the frustrations of her first year. She’s sitting forward in a comfortable chair in a college lounge area as she explains what happened. Although she’s partially hidden away in an isolated nook under a stairway, it’s a testament to her social nature that she’s interrupted three times by friends who want to say “hi.”

“It was a big difference coming here from junior high,” April says. “I was used to finishing my assignments and getting A’s just for doing them. I thought I would lay back when I started ninth grade (at Early College), turn my work in and then kick it in before exams.”

April discovered a few months into the semester that her strategy wasn’t working.

“It wasn’t just that there was so much more work to do here, but the teachers want you to put *yourself* into it, too.”

The project-based curriculum of Early College demands that students make connections between classroom material and the relevance it has on their lives. A first-year assignment in English, for example, asked students to examine the many social and personal factors that make up “where I come from.” It wasn’t the kind of assignment that could be

easily shrugged off.

“I didn’t earn all my credits last year,” April says. “In the first semester I didn’t pass anything except Spanish and math.”

As April struggled in school — a new experience for her — she became angry at teachers who kept assuring her she was capable of the demanding work. She resented their encouragement as “pushing,” and she was intimidated by their positions of authority. At the large junior high April attended the year before, the thought of a personal relationship with her teachers never occurred to her. As an A student she didn’t require more than an encouraging smile every once in a while.

In June 2006, April looked forward to a miserable summer taking makeup classes. She was discouraged enough that she might have left Toledo Early College to attend the large public high school in her neighborhood. She knew that the work would be easier, teachers would stop pushing her and she could play clarinet in their band, an opportunity not easily available at Toledo Early College.

Several factors, however, kept April at Early College and helped her turn things around. Neither April’s parents nor her sisters had gone to college, but April’s mother had a belief that April could be the first one in her family to achieve it. Her mother’s encouragement was one of the most important reasons April stayed with the program.

“Even though I was afraid I wouldn’t have enough credits to graduate with my class, my mom said it wasn’t the most

“It was a big difference coming here from junior high.”

— Student April Rios

important thing,” April says. “She kept reminding me to focus on college.”

But personal pride was the deciding factor that kept her at Toledo Early College. She was used to being successful in school, and she made the decision to try harder in the coming year. As impossible as it might have seemed for someone who hadn’t done well her first year, April vowed to her friends, “I’ll have my name on an award plaque next year.”



From the beginning of April’s second year, she exhibited a new attitude. As her determination forced her to overcome being intimidated by teachers, she was surprised to discover how much they cared about her. She had been so put off by teachers “pushing” her the year before, she hadn’t really considered the ways they could help. That began to change when she found the courage to approach science teacher Tim Bollin.

“Last year I failed science, and I was afraid I’d do it again. I was scared of Mr. Bollin, but every time I asked him questions, he would take the time to answer them. Pretty soon I was asking him for help all the time, and I wished I had talked to him sooner. I have a strong bond with Mrs. Dewey, too. She really cares about me and treats me like one of her children. Yes, she’s a teacher, but she always seems so happy to be here.”

When April was struggling to pass geometry, teacher Paul Tierney allowed

her to do extra work, and she was able to catch up with the class.

April is animated when she talks about how relationships like those have helped her reach difficult goals.

“It made me so happy — and surprised — when Mrs. Francis called my mom, and I knew that a teacher had paid attention to me.”

At the year-end awards banquet, April sits with her head on her hand in a room full of parents, students and teachers as she listens to her friends accepting plaques and recognition. She didn’t win a plaque, as she’d promised herself, but was encouraged that she’d done so much better.

Then an announcement catches her attention.

“I thought my jaw would drop when I heard my name read out loud,” she says later. “I won the KnowledgeWorks Most Improved Student award. And I was so shocked and so proud.”

She would be equally shocked and proud to hear how teachers discuss her at staff meetings.

“She is exactly the kind of kid this school is designed to serve,” social studies teacher Randy Nissen says. “One day last year I heard her saying ‘I’m a failure because I’ve lost so many credits,’ and now she’s so much more confident.”

Now, as April gets ready to take college classes during her third year at Toledo Early College High School, she knows she will succeed.

“I see myself four years from now a full-time college student: independent, living

apart from my family who has supported me. And succeeding in all my work.”

Amber Mitchell

Last year, on the first day of class, Amber Mitchell realized that Toledo Early College High School was a different kind of school. She laughs when she remembers “the WOW feeling.”

Only an hour into the school’s first day, Mrs. Dewey was explaining an in-depth assignment due in two days. Two days? She had to be kidding! At Amber’s junior high, the first few days of a new school year were spent filling out medical cards and listening to introductions.

“Interview a classmate you haven’t met yet and write a character sketch of that person,” Mrs. Dewey said.

On the surface the assignment was



“I appreciate that you have to
earn your grades here.

— Student Amber Mitchell

Student Amber Mitchell meets all the challenges Early College offers head on.



Teacher Mona Al-Hayani describes Amber Mitchell as a student who “knows what she wants.”

simple enough. Amber had no trouble asking questions. But what about the discussion of how identity is determined, multidimensional aspects of personality and varied cultural influences? Amber had taken honors classes in junior high and done well. But honors classes in her large public school mostly were the same as regular classes with extra worksheets thrown in.

It was a defining moment for Amber when she took out her notebook and tackled the challenging assignment. She would meet this demand — and many others — head-on over the next two years.



It seems as if Toledo Early College High School was just waiting for a student like Amber who was ready for challenges not available in typical high schools.

“I’m exposed to things I’d never see otherwise,” Amber says. “I’ve met kids from different neighborhoods. I’ve seen old black-and-white movies I didn’t know existed. I like the way that learning through projects forces you to go deeper into subjects than just filling out worksheets can take you. I appreciate that you have to earn your grades here.”

Amber is mature well beyond the years of an average high school sophomore. She looks at you calmly while explaining how she earned 20 college credit hours with a 3.1 average in classes such as composition, chemistry and psychology. Even her fidgeting with a ballpoint pen as she speaks doesn’t detract from her demeanor. Her poise is reflected in silver bracelets that match her silver necklace and hoop earrings. She pushes a strand of dark hair that has fallen over her glasses back in place without making a fuss.

“I like taking college classes,” she says. “They’re more interesting, and the challenge is greater. Last fall, for example, I was taking personal health, and we had a group project due, but my group kept procrastinating, and I couldn’t get them to meet. I explained to my professor that I was just a high school student, and I was having trouble. He coached me on what to say to my group in getting them together. I got an A in the class, and it was a good feeling when his advice worked so well.”

Emily Francis, who taught Amber in English this year, describes her as “incredibly mature and independent. She will go out after a kid who needs

attention and help him. I can depend on her so much.”

Mona Al-Hayani, social studies teacher, agrees.

“This is a kid who knows what she wants and is oblivious to peer pressure. She has this calm way of seeing what needs to be done and going after it.”

For her part, Amber credits her success — including being named “Social Studies Student of the Year” — to a school atmosphere “that’s like family, where I know everyone by name. The relationships with teachers are so different here, also. They’re always willing to work with you if you fall behind.”

She considers passing college chemistry as her greatest challenge, because it didn’t come easily.

Taking upper level science classes is important to Amber because she plans on a career path that may lead to business management in a medical-related field.

“I want to see the world,” Amber says. “My mother talks about dangers in foreign countries, but I can’t live my life scared. I want to see Spain, Australia and everywhere.”

She says, “It was such a great feeling when I passed the course because I knew if I could do that, then I could take whatever I wanted in the sciences and know it would be possible.” ■



About the storyteller

Larry Levy is the director of the Glass House Writing Project, a nonprofit program that supports the

teaching of creative writing in schools. A resident of Toledo, he also teaches writing to children in prison and is working on his first novel.

Africentric Early College School **Columbus, Ohio**

Once an elementary school nestled between Columbus' historic German Village and downtown, Africentric School opened in 1996, the year that Columbus Public Schools did away with busing plans that had once been legally required to keep the student population racially balanced. In an effort to curb its long-declining enrollment, the district made it easier for parents to send children to schools in their own neighborhoods and simultaneously strengthened schools that offered specialized curricula. Africentric was one of those alternative sites.

One of the country's only publicly funded African-centered schools, it began as an elementary and middle school, later adding a high school, one year at a time.

Constant administrative and staff turnover plagued the school from the beginning, hampering both student achievement and the growth of the Africentric curriculum.

Africentric adopted the early college model in 2005, but the school's uniqueness in almost every aspect has made following the lead of other early college programs impossible. It is the first early college in the state that converted an existing high school instead of starting up a new one or being housed on a college campus. Unlike its counterparts, it also retains many of the features of traditional high schools, including an athletic program and full social calendar. Although the school has a lottery-based admission policy that allows any student to enroll, the population is 100 percent African-American. It is the only Columbus public school with a student population that spans kindergarten to 12th grade.

Staff and administrative turnover also plagued the launch of the early college school, prompting the district superintendent to enlist the help of Bob Murphy, a passionate principal with experience in school reform, to help Africentric cut its own path.



Secondary students at Africentric Early College stand for the school pledge and song during the daily opening ceremony.

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It Takes a Village Council to Teach a Child

Parent group can play critical role as students step up to college work

Where They Came From, Where They're Going

Unique school combines Africentrism and early college to motivate students

By Tracy Zollinger Turner

Music pumps through the auditorium speakers while junior high and high school kids socialize before Africentric Early College's daily opening ceremony. Students greet teachers with the familial "Mama" and "Baba" instead of "Mrs." and "Mr." Large colorful banners that flank the room illustrate the "Nguzo Saba," Swahili for "seven principles," that are guiding forces of the Africentric philosophy.

When the bell rings, teachers turn the music down and firmly urge students to stand up and quiet down for the daily pledge. One student leads them:

*Today I pledge to be
The best possible me...*

Principal Bob Murphy takes his time walking up the aisle while the students say the pledge, examining faces up and down each row.

*No matter how good I am,
I know that I can become better.*

He surveys faces through four more stanzas, and the students take their seats as he takes the microphone.

"Every day we talk about the importance of the pledge, and today I see a lot of you saying *nothing*," he says in a firm tone. "We are about excellence here."

With that, he has the students stand and repeat the pledge. One girl still keeps her mouth closed. Once the day's

announcements are complete, Murphy brings her to the front of the room and has her repeat it once more, alone, before everyone is released to class.

"I tell them if they don't know it, they can't live it," he says.

Getting them to live it still proves difficult.



When Murphy arrived at Africentric on his 56th birthday in mid-May 2005, the school was in crisis. He had been the principal at Brookhaven High School for three years as it began its transition from one large high school to three small ones. But the district needed help with its only early college: after a year of funding, the school was at a standstill. Students needed to be prepared for the academic and social challenges of taking courses at Columbus State Community College, and beyond stepping up their academic game in the classroom, teachers were supposed to be learning ways to effectively advise and support students through that transition. Only one academic year was left to prepare



"We are about excellence here."

— Principal Bob Murphy



Bob Murphy, principal of Africentric's secondary school, plays a lunchtime game of chess against one of his favorite opponents, sophomore Jaleel Mullins.

students who already had difficulty performing in a high school setting to succeed independently in college courses, and the academic culture of Africentric hadn't even begun to change.

Before he started his position as Africentric's secondary school principal, Murphy visited on a few afternoons and found chaos. Well after bells rang and students should have been inside the classroom, he would find 40 or 50 of them still roaming the hallways. Enrollment was dropping rapidly at a time when the district budget was forcing school building closures. The secondary school's teaching staff of fewer than 50 was absent a total of 883 days that school year.

Fights broke out daily; some teachers say that they were afraid to come to work, calling it "a war zone."

"We didn't have fights. We had *riots* on that playground," one says. And more than one of the long-term teachers felt that the school ended up with many students who had not done well anywhere else, academically or behaviorally. Soon they were overwhelmed.

"It was like they thought we were going to sprinkle some magical African dust on them and instantly turn them

around," another says.

As the school grew into a high school, the building churned through new administrators and staff. With turnover at both the elementary and secondary levels, Murphy is the sixth principal that some of the school's few veteran teachers have worked with in 11 years.

"For the first year, my focus was simply to right the ship and give it a new foundation," says Murphy. He enforced two rules, posted throughout the building:

Rule #1:

*Be where you are supposed to be
When you are supposed to be there
Doing what you are supposed to be doing.*

Rule #2:

*Respect yourself, respect your peers,
respect your elders.*

"It gave me a starting point with the students when they were sent to me with disciplinary problems," he says. "I can always start the conversation with 'OK, which of the rules did you break?'"

Mikia Tarver, a junior who started at Africentric in the first grade and wants to someday be an early childhood

teacher, nearly left for another high school because “the kids were basically running the school... there were at least five fights a week.”

But things changed dramatically with the arrival of Murphy and his assistant high school principal Theodore Thompson, a younger man with a firm approach to discipline. While fights aren't extinct now, incidents are far fewer. And after one full year of new leadership on campus, test scores and other indicators of academic success started to climb.

Still, progress is slow. In order to begin taking classes at Columbus State, juniors must have a 3.0 grade average and pass all sections of the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) as well as Columbus State's required COMPASS (Computer-Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System) test, requirements that arise out of the school's partnership with Columbus State. Only a handful of students made the cut for the summer 2006 quarter. Another group of juniors, delayed by not passing the science or math portions of the OGT, will be able to start in the winter if they pass the summer makeup test.



A couple of months before he sends his first group of newly minted juniors over to the classrooms of Columbus State in summer 2006, Murphy experiences his first major setback. He had put together a staff of the school's most committed teachers and several fresh faces excited by the prospect of early college.

“I was ecstatic about the staff we had hired,” he says. But massive budget cuts in the district pink-slipped six of them just weeks before they were to begin working. They are replaced by more senior teachers in the district, most of whom are not invested in the idea of early college, the Africentric philosophy or working on the year-round calendar

that's necessary to coordinate with the schedule at Columbus State.

Another cost-cutting measure, shortening the school day by a full class period, derails Murphy's plans to incorporate advisory periods. A safety net for students, advisories are meant to charge every staff member with keeping track of 12 to 15 students — knowing how they are doing academically, even emotionally.

Now there will be no time to train the new staff, and figuring out how to wedge in two advisory periods a week without interrupting required curriculum is going to take some doing.

But difficulties have never prevented Murphy from trying to get his staff or the district's administration to see the school's potential. Africentric is possibly the only early college in a building that houses kindergarten through 12th grade in the nation, a fact that he says his early college colleagues around the country envy because of the opportunity to begin college preparation well before freshman year.

Murphy hopes to take advantage of that edge. He strongly supported adding “Early College” to the name for the entire building and the staff greets all students daily with the salutation “Good morning, Africentric Early College students,” even those who aren't tall enough to ride a roller coaster.



A master of axioms, Murphy consistently repeats those that he truly believes in to students and staff. His bookshelves are full of volumes about inspired teaching, faith and ethical living. With students, he's always forthcoming with stories of the difficult times in his life and the strategies he used to cope.

Born in Cleveland, Murphy moved in the seventh grade to Seattle, where his single mom worked two and three jobs to keep him enrolled in a private all-boys

Catholic High School. At 19, he knew he was going to be drafted in the Vietnam War, so he joined the Marine Corps. During his tour of duty, he was made a squad leader, in charge of the safety of 14 men.

When he returned, he enrolled in the Ohio State University.

“Early on in my life, teaching was the last thing I wanted to do. The only reason why I went to college was — there were three letters in my vocabulary: NFL. I was going to major in football, you know, and degrees didn't mean anything.”

When he realized his pro sports dream wasn't going to materialize, he began to search for something else and worked toward a teaching degree. After a few years of teaching kids at the Columbus Recreation Department, he taught art in area private schools before



Principal Bob Murphy shows students he cares about them and their futures.

“We have accomplished much, but there’s SO much more to do.”

– *Principal Bob Murphy*

becoming a teacher and football coach for Columbus Public Schools in 1987. As he grew into the role of teacher, so did his passion for the work, and his approach was never conventional.

“In my 15 or so years in the classroom, I probably wrote 10 discipline slips, and that wasn’t because kids didn’t act out. We just had a relationship where we dealt with everything in house. It got to a point where kids would even police

each other; ‘Quit giving Mr. Murphy a hassle, you know, sit down and shut up.’ It made it very easy for me. And I tell teachers now, if you are not a relationship person for the benefit of the student, at least be a relationship person for the benefit of you as a teacher.”

Murphy says he was shaped by military service. “Coming home after what I experienced in Vietnam, life was just irrevocably changed,” he says. “Every

day for me is a blessing because I was involved in a couple of situations where I could have been dead. I know there is a purpose to what I do, and there is a reason why I did not die in Vietnam. I know I could have and so I take that very seriously and I firmly believe in my heart that what I’m doing now I was supposed to do.”

His strength as an administrator isn’t



“I tell my teachers... if you are not a relationship person for the benefit of the student, at least be a relationship person for the benefit of you as a teacher,” says Murphy, pictured here with tutor Solomon Aieryu.

scaring students into behaving properly. It's showing them he cares enough about them, and that makes many work hard to please him.

When he hears angry words from students outside of his office door, he calls them in to ask questions like, "Is there something wrong today? I'm hearing some hateful language come out of your mouth. Why is that?"

Standing near the front doors as school lets out, students beckon him verbally, sidle up to say hello or hug him. One boy puts his arm around him and pats him on his bald head.

"Why are you all over Baba Murphy like that?" another boy asks.

"I love him. He's like my uncle," the boy says, shrugging. "He is."

And with the expectant tone of a nephew or son, the boy asks Murphy, "Would you be disappointed if it turned out my girlfriend was pregnant?"

"No." Murphy says flatly. Before the boy has the chance to react: "I'd be really *really* disappointed if that were the case."

"Really?"

Murphy raises his eyebrows, lowers his chin to look over the top of his glasses at the boy and gives a quick double nod.

The boy looks concerned.

"I don't know," he offers. "She might not be."

"I hope not," says Murphy. "I hope not."



In late January, the assistant administrators of the high and middle school deliver difficult numbers to the secondary school staff. The good news is that higher numbers of students are beginning to excel, earning upwards of a 3.0 grade-point average. The bad news is that more than half are still beneath a 2.0. Administrators will be attending departmental meetings; teachers who aren't meeting expectations will be put on individual professional development plans.

"The majority of our students are

failing," Ernest West, the assistant principal of the middle school tells the group.

"Professionally, you know what the answers are, but we need the commitment. Their failure is our failure, believe it or not."

Murphy hangs back and watches the two assistant principals address the group for several minutes before addressing the issues himself.

"There is collective wisdom in this room, and if we talk to each other, then we can become a professional learning team," he says. "We have to get to the point where we're comfortable having the hard conversations with each other. We know the issues are there; the question is what are we going to do about them, for our sakes and our babies'."

The room is mostly silent. More than one teacher nods in agreement, but many keep their eyes fixed on the tables where they sit.

"I try to be really honest and self-reflective, and I know there are some things I don't do well, and if we went around the room we could all say the same thing. But maybe what I lack, you possess and we can make each other stronger. We've been going in circles too long. We have accomplished much, but there's so much more to do."

Thompson, the high school assistant principal, announces that video cameras will be available to the teachers so they can begin to tape themselves and find



Students such as junior Donald Lindsey have seen the academic culture of Africentric begin to change in the past two years.



School leaders introduced the National Honor Society as a way to make academic success more rewarding for students, including freshman JoNeisha Mock.

out how to strengthen their instructional abilities. Murphy picks up quickly on some skeptical looks from the staff.

“The best thing I did in my 14 years in the classroom was to videotape myself and see what I did right and what I did wrong,” he tells them. “It’s not an evaluation. It’s a diagnostic tool for you to become better teachers.”



A few weeks later, the school is in a state of elation. The girls’ basketball team wins the Division IV state championship. A few days after the final game, the team is honored at an assembly. Television cameras line the back of the auditorium as a group of suited men lingers near the back. They

flank Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman as, amid the sound of African drumming, he makes his way to the front row and joins the district superintendent. Murphy stays with the mayor until he’s halfway down the aisle, where he stops and instructs two boys to pull up their low-slung pants.

When he introduces the Lady Nubian team, the auditorium fills with shrieks, drums and yells. The girls walk to the stage, championship medals around their necks.

“Needless to say, it was a history-making season for these ladies,” says Murphy. “But let me say this, which I said to them myself before they were champions. Not only are they great basketball players, not only are they great students and ladies, but I would be proud to call any of them my daughter.”



Changing the culture of a school requires more than discipline, and a few teachers, parents and administrators work hard to make academic success more appealing to students. In its 11-year history, Africentric has not had a National Honor Society. When teachers and administrators create one, they do so with a huge helping of pomp and circumstance. On a winter evening, chairs along the front row of the auditorium are covered in tall, white sheaths with symbols of Africa across the back. A small group of parents has gone to great lengths to make the students feel especially honored. Ten

“Ability may get you to the top,
but it’s *character* that keeps you there.”

– *Principal Bob Murphy*

ferns and six bushes wrapped in white lights flank the stage, which has been lined in black, green and red panels.

Administrators and teachers sit on the stage wearing caps and gowns, approaching a lectern to speak. Murphy will talk to them about character and leadership.

“Character is what you do when nobody is watching,” he tells the group. “And without character, there is no leadership.

“Ability may get you to the top, but it’s character that keeps you there.”

The rewards for being part of the NHS are many. Students inducted into the society will be given the privilege of having the teacher’s trust if they are late to class and allowed to cross the street for Chinese food at lunchtime (parents willing). They will also take all-expenses-paid trips to Philadelphia, Harlem, New York and Washington DC.

Tony Richardson, president of the Village Council (Africentric’s PTA), asks the inductees and parents to stand. “We’re going to make a pledge to the inductees,” he says. “That we will lead by example and be there for them. We will be there to back them up when they need us.”

Even so, most of the students taking classes at Columbus State are barely hanging on. Some of them are thrown by the volume of the college workload. Work that carried an A for them at Africentric simply isn’t enough to pass at Columbus State. Some end up back in Africentric classes, defeated and humiliated.

That worries Rebekah Reeves, an English teacher. A member of the Early College’s governance committee, Reeves tells the group about a student who came to her for help during a spring meeting.

“She told me after we were done working that she had skipped class to get that help from me. I was so upset. She did not understand that she could not skip class and expect to pass her Columbus State classes,” Reeves says to the group of representatives from Africentric, the school district and Columbus State. “And I don’t think that it’s the kids failing. I think we’re failing them.”

“These are the best kids I’ve had at

Africentric, and they are getting Cs and Ds. It’s not fair.”

Murphy agrees.

“We want them to fly on their own, but right now, we’re asking baby birds with no wing development to fly,” he says.

Figuring out how to better support those students becomes a top priority for the rest of the school year. The school’s liaison for Africentric students at Columbus State is charged with helping ease their transition and keeping tabs on how they’re doing. That job is difficult, however, since her office is at Africentric. As the year progresses, leaders make sure that she gets her own



Finding better ways to prepare students for the experience of taking classes at Columbus State has become a top priority for Africentric’s governance committee. Sophomore Deja Torrence is among those who could benefit.

office space on the college campus. This way, students have somewhere to go between classes when they are on campus, and she is able to look in and make sure they are there.

She also begins work on a summer course for students to give them the basic study skills they need to succeed in college courses. Through the spring, the school's governance committee comes up with more productive ideas and people willing to work on them, but doesn't always have the power to enact them.

"We can sit around and talk about what needs to happen, but if the decision makers are not here, we're shouting into the wind," says Murphy, shaking his head. "They first of all have to understand that the program that they crafted is not the program that they have ...

There are so many things on our side of the ledger that need to be done."



As the spring quarter winds up, Murphy is rocked with another change. More teachers in the secondary school decide to leave Africentric than to stay another year. The reasons are mixed. Some didn't want to be there in the first place, some dislike the year-round schedule. A couple of them, including Reeves, have aspirations that take them elsewhere — to other cities or into administrative training.

For Murphy, it's a disappointment.

"I have to look at what I do as a leader and figure out where I've not done it well enough to retain a staff," he says. "I was hoping to stabilize that, and the turnover this year is bigger than last year."

Still, plans for the new school year, which rapidly approaches at the end of June, are set in motion and there is positive change. He pushes for a large meeting that includes key decision makers from the school district, KnowledgeWorks, Columbus State and the teachers union. When the meeting comes together at the end of May, Murphy makes a case for several of the things the governance committee and its subcommittees have proposed through the spring. He feels that the response from all parties is positive.

Along with the go-ahead for building better support systems for the students, there are conversations about the possibility of some teachers becoming adjunct professors at Columbus State, which could provide extra incentive for his staff to stay. Plans to investigate Columbus State online courses that can be supervised by Africentric teachers are also put into motion.

He plans a two-day advisory training for the summer where not only every teacher but also every custodian, cafeteria



Africentric freshman William Alls attends one of the few schools where an early college program has been introduced to an existing school.



High teacher turnover has plagued Africentric throughout its history. Veteran English teacher Angela Eddings, conferring with junior Candace Williams, will help mentor new teaching staff.

worker and secretary will learn to take on a group of advisees to encourage and support. When a student has any minor discipline problem, the adviser will be the first person he or she will see.

“It’s the only way it will work,” he says. “It’s the only way I can keep the numbers down so that people are responsible for about a dozen kids.”

“The goal is not to suspend anybody next year. I’m willing to come in every Saturday morning for Saturday school to make that a reality.”

Murphy also brings in a consultant to do teambuilding with the eight or nine remaining teachers to prepare them, and the school, for life with 10 new teachers who will be placed by the district, instead of coming to the school by

choice. He wants everyone to be part of training the new group at a staff retreat.

“I told them when these new people roll in here, if we are not all speaking with the same voice and saying, ‘This is who we are, this is what we need from you, this is what our kids need from you,’ then they’re going to get all these mixed messages and it’s going to take us months to build trust,” he says.

“We’ve got to be open enough to come in and say to the new staff members, ‘I trust you until you show me that you can’t be trusted,’” in the same way Murphy asked parents and teachers to trust him when he arrived at Africentric. “I think that will take us forward much faster.” ■

It Takes a Village Council to Teach a Child

Parent group can play critical role as students step up to college work



Parent Frances Figueroa-Jackson is a passionate advocate for the school.

By Tracy Zollinger Turner

“Will the eldest person in the room please grant permission for the meeting to begin?” one member of Africentric Early College’s Village Council asks.

The 15 or so people in the room hold hands in a circle, examining each other’s faces for clues: wrinkles around the eyes, gray hair around the ears. It’s a younger crowd tonight.

“We don’t have to go through all of that,” one parent says. “I can see I’m the oldest one here tonight, and you have my permission to begin.”

“Does anyone have any opening remarks for tonight’s meeting?” another council member asks.

“Problems present new opportunities,” one parent offers.

“Many hands make labor light,” says another.

The Village Council is unlike any other PTA in the Columbus Public School system for more reasons than one. The parents represent children from kindergarten through 12th grade at the school, which is one of the only Africentric schools in the state.

“It takes a village to raise a child,” is often repeated inside of Africentric’s walls, and at the village council you can hear the entire student body referred to as “our babies” or “our geniuses.” While it may not be the largest parent organization in the city, its members are extremely committed. They want to see all students succeed and the early college program to take hold. But for many of them, schooling their children in an Africentric environment — not early college — is the essential reason they pour time

and energy into the school.

In its 11-year history, there has been no steady mechanism for new teachers to learn Africentric curriculum when they are hired into the building. But the gaps in teachers’ knowledge is offset by a handful of parents who keep the African-centered philosophy in the students’ view. A large display case near the entrance is filled with sculptures, fabrics and paintings that allude to African parables. When African-American holidays approach, a parent appears in staff meetings, wielding booklets

“African-centered education isn’t just about the one, but about many as one.”

– Parent Fran Figueroa-Jackson



Members of the Village Council work to help advance the early college program while preserving the school’s Africentric philosophy.

that explain their purpose and meaning. Honors for the students are often underscored with Africentric ceremonies, replete with symbols designed by parents.

Proponents of early college have tried to embrace and nurture parents’ enthusiasm. They believe parental involvement and support is critical to success for high school students who must step up to meet the expectations of college work.

When the concept of an early college high school was introduced in 2004, many parents feared that it could further displace the Africentric education they so dearly want to see thrive.

“Initially there were concerns, and there should have been because Africentric teaching had already been watered down and we didn’t want to dilute it any more,” says Fran Figueroa-Jackson, a paid parent consultant who is both a

mother to one student at the school and grandmother to another. “But then we looked at the overall positive, potential resources available to our children and realized this could only help.”

Some of the most critical contributions parents have made have come in the form of not only helping the school’s administration change the culture of the building, but helping to keep other parents informed and involved, through networking, phone calls, even a focus group held late in the school year. They experience their share of frustrations as well because they do not hold formal power in the school’s structure.

That hasn’t prevented them from making their voices heard, however. When the time came for the elementary school staff to consider moving its annual calendar to the year-round schedule that reflects Columbus State’s, parents came to their

staff meeting to lean on the teachers to accept the change. The calendar change will be made a year later than the parents and administrators wanted (the 2008-’09 school year), but it will be made.

Figueroa-Jackson keeps track of some of the parents who volunteer at the school, but aren’t able to make it to Village Council meetings. She calls them to let them know that their work hasn’t gone unnoticed.

“African-centered education isn’t just about the one, but about many as one,” she says. “That’s why we tell the children not to laugh at any of their classmates who are not doing well. Because if they’re not doing well, that means we’re all not doing well.”



About the storyteller

Tracy Zollinger Turner is a freelance writer and editor from Columbus, Ohio. Her work has appeared in

Columbus Alive, the *Columbus Dispatch*, several regional publications, including *Ohio Magazine*, on multiple national web sites and public radio. She also blogs at tinymantras.com.

Lorain County Early College High School **Elyria, Ohio**

As Lorain County Early College High School began its third year, it was learning to accommodate its unique blend of students and teachers from two school systems long known as local rivals. The partnership among Elyria City Schools, Lorain City Schools and the Lorain County Community College was beginning to find a comfortable rhythm.

When the school opened on the community college campus in 2004-05, all of its 60 students were enrolled in Elyria schools. They were joined the following year by students and teachers from Lorain City Schools, with sometimes-conflicting policies and schedules. Now, in the 2006-07 year, the freshman class consisted only of Lorain students; Elyria had elected not to send new students.

There were still some kinks in the fabric, though. When a tornado touched down in Elyria, for instance, the Elyria school system canceled classes and students from Elyria stayed home. But the Lorain buses ran that day and Lorain students came to school.

Staff members shrug off such incidents as mere annoyances; they have adjusted to the dual operation. Technically an early college “program,” as students are officially enrolled in their home school districts, Lorain County Early College is a school in almost every other sense of the word.

In 2007-08, Lorain County Early College will transform yet again, as Elyria City Schools again contributes students to the venture. And the school will grow by 100 students to its planned maximum of 400, with half a dozen new teachers but no new classrooms — a challenge that will call for more detailed logistics than ever before.

Principal Roslyn Valentine isn’t worried. Still the guiding force of the “Early College family,” as she calls them, Valentine ended her third year on the crest of students’ achievements: they soared above all comparison groups in their Ohio Graduation Test scores and final grades, and six of “her” juniors made the dean’s list of Lorain County Community College.

Clearly, Valentine’s vision for Lorain County Early College works. But as the school continues to change and grow, she can only hope that its growing pains are in the past.



Principal Roslyn Valentine and teacher Gwen Gilmore share a hug at a ceremony celebrating the accomplishments of Lorain County Early College students.

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Trade Offs

Freshmen swap proms and sports teams for college credit and a different kind of high school experience

A Culture of Learning

Principal works to strengthen students' commitment to education — a commitment she says changes teenagers

By Mary Mihaly

Ros Valentine's tough façade falls away while hundreds of people watch. She stops talking and looks down at the lectern, her mouth tightening, eyes tearing up. For most, it is the first time they have witnessed the depth of her caring; they know her only as the stern rule-maker whose booming voice can reduce football players to tears and silence the most highly skilled whiners. The Lorain County Early College High School principal takes a deep breath, gives herself a moment to gain composure and continues speaking.

“You know that these high school students need 62 college credits to earn an associate degree,” she tells the audience of parents and teachers, there to honor the students' achievements of the first semester. “What you don't know is that when fall semester ended, 33 students had earned 28 credits or more. This spring, some juniors already will have earned 53 credits — and will be just *nine* credits away from an associate degree. At this rate, every one of them will graduate with a grade-point average of 3.5 or higher.

“They have put their goals above everything. You have to be impressed,” she concludes as the audience bursts into cheers and a standing ovation — for Valentine, for the students and for their families, who until Lorain County



“They have put their goals
above *everything.*”

— *Principal Roslyn Valentine*



Roslyn Valentine offers encouragement to Abigail Pawlus. She believes the commitment required of students at an early college school teaches them to be advocates for themselves.

ECHS might not have seen college as a realistic goal for their children. Valentine understands their pride. The 54-year-old educator, who grew up in small-town Appalachia, was the first college student in her own family.

Later that week, on a sunny afternoon in January, Valentine sits in her office and talks about her feelings during the awards ceremony. “How can I talk about this without sounding smug?” she reflects. “Ever since we’ve come here, there have been naysayers. Most of those kids you saw that night were at a failing point when they came here, but instead, they chose to fight.

“The commitment changes them. That’s been the biggest thrill for me, watching these children become adults in a way that doesn’t happen in regular high school. These kids are learning

advocacy for themselves. They will never be a victim again.”

Bumps in the road

Whether all of her charges will end their careers as successfully depends in part on factors that Valentine cannot control. On a Monday morning in spring, Valentine waits for her teachers to arrive for their daily meeting. She will raise topics during the meeting that point to her biggest concern as principal: Because Lorain County ECCHS students are technically enrolled in other schools throughout the county, Valentine does not participate in hiring the school’s teachers. She cannot interview prospective teachers to determine whether they agree with her vision for Early College, and she has no idea whether new hires are willing to invest

the time and energy needed to help marginal students.

Teachers greet each other and sip hot coffee as they walk into the science classroom, their personalities jostling and blending. Rosey Wagner, the school adviser, struggles with an armful of books. Behind her, English teacher Stephanie Gerrone says something in Wagner's ear. "You smellin' what I'm cooking?" Gerrone says as they both take a seat.

The group exudes a sense of camaraderie, a feeling that they all have embarked on a grand adventure together. They meet to talk about administrative matters, listen to professional development guest speakers, and trade

ideas and experiences. Science teacher Rosemary O'Toole-Hamman is the first to welcome a visitor. History teacher Mike Kishman talks with English teacher Pam Roberts about a teaching model that incorporates literacy in all subject areas. Math teacher Pam Hanshumaker, the last to hurry into the meeting, is recruited as this semester's team leader. ("I didn't volunteer," she wants to make clear.)

"We need to get started," Valentine tells the small group. "We have a lot to talk about today, and much of it is not good news."

She announces that the previous afternoon, a freshman girl withdrew

from the school. "I consider this a loss," Valentine said. "I don't know what we didn't do, but this girl is very smart and we failed to move her in a way that would benefit her.

"She didn't make much of an attempt (to succeed) on her own, but that doesn't excuse what *we* didn't do. It doesn't excuse her ownership and her family's, but we failed as well."

The girl who withdrew was one of the freshman class's "five angry girls" that the teachers have discussed several times. "The students I'm having trouble with this year are not boys," Valentine says. "Nine out of 10 students sent to me are girls. One girl I sent home yesterday didn't want to change her bustier."

The teachers agree. "We have a lot of angry girls in the freshman class," one says. "They don't seem to have a lot of respect for authority," offers another. Their conversation has a purpose: They resolve to design, over the summer, a set of cues and supportive answers to use when they need to de-escalate a student's anger.

There is a hint of defeat in Valentine's voice as she then informs the group of a policy change. "This is something I've never done before. Next year, I'm going to tell the students who were not successful that they have to leave."

For the school's first two years, Valentine explains, she would allow any student to return, even with all failing grades. "It has always been my hope that they would turn around, and that has happened a few times." But the school's resources are spread too thin, she says, to carry those who take no initiative. In the future, she will grant them one grading period's grace time; if she sees no change, those students will return to their home schools. They will no longer be part of what she calls "the Early College family."

Valentine asks the teachers for comments, and no one disagrees with



Adviser Rosey Wagner, who brings a glass-half-full disposition to her work, helps student Sydney Bryant-Bates.

“It’s never been an ability question.
It’s a **maturity** question.”

— *Principal Roslyn Valentine*

her new policy. No one knows better than they about the school’s stretched resources. On other mornings, when Valentine isn’t in the room, teachers worry out loud about the 2007-08 school year. When the fourth class starts up, Lorain County ECHS will grow by another 100 students.

“Look at this classroom,” O’Toole-Hamman says, pointing to the chairs and tables. “The room is full. Where will they put 25 students in here?” Her colleagues join in — they need more rooms, they need more teachers; some wonder whether they will be invited back next year.

“We’ll never have more rooms,” Valentine later responds. Not all classrooms are in use every period, so as more teachers are hired, all will rotate to maximize use of any vacant rooms. It won’t be as convenient as keeping to one classroom all the time and Valentine knows teachers will grouse, but the classes still will be relatively small and everyone will fit.

A ‘squandered opportunity’

But on this spring morning, Valentine wants to talk to the teachers about one other student: Micah G., who left after his freshman year. She distributes copies of a letter Micah sent her.

“I have been thinking about the Early College for the past two months,” Micah writes, “second guessing my decisions about transferring, and most times I feel like I made the wrong decision ...

“I have made a lot of poor decisions in my life but this tops all the poor decisions. I had a great chance of getting into college, I had a better chance than other high school students, but I’m just an average student now.” The teachers slump a little as they read, visibly saddened that a 15-year-old kid they had lost would feel that kind of regret.

“My freshman year I made a lot of mistakes in my grades, work ethic, etc., but I thought I wasn’t smart,” he writes. “(Now I know) I wasn’t working as hard as I could and I was lazy. All the things I have wrote you is coming from my heart personally ... If I had a second chance to do better in my ‘life ways’ then the Early



Math teacher Pam Hanshumaker confers with Kenston Ausbrook. Principal Roslyn Valentine says the school’s success relies on “teachers who will do everything in their power to explore every possibility with a student.”



Lorain County Early College is for struggling students, according to principal Ros Valentine. "If the only students we save are the motivated ones, why have an Early College? Those kids will succeed anyway."

College program could have helped me in improving."

For Micah, Early College is a squandered opportunity. He would not be permitted to return, Valentine says, "because of how much instruction has taken place since he left. He would struggle to fit in at this point."

But they move on. Earlier that week, students joined other schools in attending a presentation by Jared Diamond, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. O'Toole-Hamman reports students' consensus: "It was lame," she tells the teachers. "He talked about himself for 10 minutes, then took questions. They learned nothing."

More important are the students' reactions to students from other schools. "They were intimidated," she says. "Kids from other schools dressed better and carried themselves with some poise, and there were no students of color." Because

the visiting students looked more polished, Lorain County students thought the others were smarter and asked better questions. O'Toole-Hamman's assurance that their questions were "10 times better" offered little consolation.

Planting seeds

The episode with outside students prompts the teachers to renew an earlier decision to invite a consultant from the Barbizon modeling school to counsel students on etiquette, poise and dressing for success. Some days later, the Barbizon consultant gives her presentation, but many students think her instruction is boring and irrelevant, and a number of teachers agree. "She didn't know her audience," one remarks in a teachers' meeting.

Walking outside, taking the "long route" back to her office to enjoy a minute of sunshine, adviser Rosey

Wagner brings her cheery, glass-half-full disposition to the matter. "Now, see, I disagree," she says, stepping off the sidewalk to feel the new-grown grass underfoot. "I think it *was* successful. We can take the things she talked about and reinforce them, things like etiquette and self-esteem. The speaker's job was just to plant the first seeds in the kids' minds; now we need to revisit them."

That afternoon, Valentine arrives at a meeting of the Early College steering committee, and her powerful presence shrinks a bit. These are her bosses — officials from Lorain County Community College and the Elyria and Lorain public school systems. One of those attending the meeting is Jeff Jaroscak, the coach provided by KnowledgeWorks and the person responsible, he says, for "providing guidance to make sure the Early College makes decisions consistent with the early



Teachers at the Lorain County Early College share strong camaraderie and a feeling that they have embarked on a grand adventure together.

college mission. That means I spend a lot of time in meetings, managing the tension.”

Here, the tension happens on several levels. Valentine is responsible for the teachers’ performance and, early in the meeting, distributes charts showing student progress to date. “Any course we struggle with is not about ability,” she tells one official who wonders about an area where there has been no recent movement. “It’s never been an ability question. It’s a maturity question. ‘Nobody’s watching me, so I don’t have to do the work.’”

What makes her life easier when students misbehave, she adds, are the college’s and school districts’ policies. “They’re already in place,” she says, “I just use them. The only piece I’ve brought is I’m more vigilant with parents. I spend most of my days talking with parents.”

Valentine answers more questions; her answers are pointed. Electives will be career-oriented. Graphic arts is “a blessing” because so many students express themselves visually. Choir now is the only music course offered. (“One year we had all horns,” she said. “The next year — well, it’s hard to have a band when you have seven drums and one trumpet.”)

The meeting is cordial, if a bit formal. Over the next hour, a sense develops that

some on this committee view Lorain County Early College High School as temporary — an experiment worth pursuing, but not necessarily a commitment. Obstacles enter the dialogue, such as the lack of support by Elyria businesses. “I’d like to think our community is as philanthropic as other places,” says Paul Rigda, Elyria Schools superintendent, “but they say to me, ‘Hey, we *paid* to send our kids to college.’”

An awkward silence follows, and Dee Morgan, superintendent of Lorain City Schools, rises to leave. “Here’s what impresses me,” she says, putting on her coat. “These issues are deep and difficult. But I leave each meeting encouraged that we continue to hold this together. We all want to make this work.”

Valentine has changed, she says, in her three years at Lorain County ECHS. “I’m more mellow. In this setting, we can do what teachers have always wanted to do. We can work with small groups of kids and see the results up close.”

Most dedicated

And the results, Valentine is proud to reveal, have exceeded everyone’s expectations. Not only did all Lorain County ECHS students but three pass their Ohio Graduation Tests, but six of Valentine’s juniors made the Lorain County Community College dean’s list.

For now Valentine’s hiring concern dissipates and she savors sweet success.

A second awards ceremony is held in June, and students and teachers make sure Valentine knows she is appreciated. When all the student honors have been announced, Valentine’s face appears on a large screen with the caption, “Most Dedicated.”

Math teacher Gwen Gilmore gives a brief tribute: “She has a vision for a culture of learners,” Gilmore says, “that reaches far beyond anything we have seen in this community.”

Valentine steps to the microphone. This time, she doesn’t choke up: “It is one of the joys of my life to be able to say I am working with students who value education.” As she steps away from the lectern, her “Early College family” cheers and gives her — only her this time — a standing ovation.

Valentine would love to spend the rest of her career grooming such excellence in her students, year after year.

Later, in her tiny, glass-walled office, Valentine talks about the decision to turn away the poorest performers. “Does it trouble me? I think about what’s best for that child, and if Early College is not best for them, then it’s not troubling,” she says. “But ... did we miss a cue or overlook some solution that would have helped them succeed? When it’s that intrinsic piece and you have no control, that’s when it hurts.

“But that’s when I need to know I have teachers who will do everything in their power to explore every possibility with a student,” she adds. “Do I have teachers who will work and work with students like the ‘angry girls’ so those students will be successful? One has been sleeping in a car all spring. They’re all struggling with authority. I need to know I can count on my teachers to spend time with them.

“That’s who this school is for. It’s not for the kids who are already motivated. If the only students we save are the motivated ones, why have an Early College? Those kids will succeed anyway.” ■

Trade Offs

Freshmen swap proms and sports teams for college credit and a different kind of high school experience



Freshman Joyce Brumley enrolled at Early College at her grandmother's suggestion. She acknowledges a belligerent streak, but her teachers have discovered an excellent student behind the tough girl stance.

By Mary Mibaly

Barely into their teens, the third crop of freshmen at Lorain County Early College High School (ECHS) seem out of place here on a college campus. They don't fit their surroundings, these 14- and 15-year-olds; kids their age are driven by emotions and hormones, not lofty ideas like learning and excellence. Their decision to sacrifice the usual high school experience — pep rallies, homecoming dances, school plays — and instead rush around a college campus is a choice many teenagers might find hard to fathom.

That's a reaction the early college students would understand. For many, attending this special school was no personal choice; they were pushed here by their parents, who weren't about to pass up free college tuition and a head start in life for their kids. Teachers tell of students' initial resistance and protests, accompanied by much sobbing and drama.

But after their first year of college life, the youngest Lorain County ECHS students are jazzed about Early College. They take pride in having already completed college classes. They stand a bit more erect than when they first walked onto campus less than a year ago.

Here are three of their stories.

Joyce Brumley

In the beginning, few students showed more attitude than Joyce Brumley.

"Can someone tell me on what avenue you would find the Loretto Chapel?" asks English teacher Pam Roberts one January morning as she distributes maps of downtown Santa Fe. "Anyone?"

("You wouldn't believe the number of kids who can't locate something on a simple street map," she says later to an observer.)

"How is this going to help us in reading?" asks a student sitting along the back wall. Dressed all in black, blonde



Joyce Brumley completes her Goth look with a leather wristband and black-polished fingernails. While she waits for Roberts to respond to her challenge, Joyce pops two Cheetos into her mouth and takes a swig from a can of Dr Pepper.

Roberts doesn't rise to the bait, but instead turns her attention to a boy whose pants are drooping too far. "If you don't have a belt tomorrow, don't bother coming to class," she tells him.

"That's dumb," Joyce intervenes as she opens her makeup bag and begins applying mascara.

"That's a detention for you," the teacher tells Joyce.

"Why do you hate me?" Joyce whines.

"Two detentions."

"Jerk."

"One more and you get to go see Valentine," Roberts says, referring to Principal Roslyn Valentine. Joyce sulks for the remainder of the class.

One of seven siblings (or nine, Joyce says, "if you count the stepkids"), she currently lives with her grandmother, Kay Goldsmith, so that she can be a resident of the Lorain School District and attend Lorain County ECHS. When a visitor arrives at her home to talk about the early college experience, Joyce decides not to join her grandmother and the guest at the kitchen table and squats on the floor nearby.

On the wall hangs a framed photo of the grandkids, their Christmas gift to Mrs. Goldsmith. Bursting with pride, she cuts in to speak for Joyce. "She chose that school because college is so terrifically expensive," she begins. "With the two-year degree on top of high school, she can get a scholarship beyond that point."

"I still get in **trouble** a lot because of my attitude."

— *Student Joyce Brumley*



Pam Roberts is Joyce Brumley's favorite teacher. "She makes me redo work that she thinks I can do better – even for other classes," Joyce says.

Joyce corrects her grandmother. "Grandma wanted me to go; it wasn't my idea," she says. "I thought it would be a lot harder than it is, though."

Joyce's easy adjustment shows in her grades: All year, she has earned a spot on the High-Honor Roll by maintaining straight A's.

Despite her good grades, Joyce has gaps in her knowledge. One afternoon, Roberts asked her English class for their opinions of a poem she'd just read. When no one spoke up, she asked if anyone was awake.

"Well, I didn't know who Maya Angelou was," Joyce answered.

"Really? Poor little white girl," said a male voice from the far side of the room.

"So, who is she?" Joyce asked. "I thought you said Michelangelo."

Her biggest gripe is the absence of normal high school events such as dances. "I didn't like staying home while other kids I knew went to their winter formal," she says. "I'm not mad every day about it, but on the night of the dance, I was."

Joyce acknowledges her belligerent streak. "I still get in trouble a lot because of my attitude," she says. "I get sent to Mrs. Valentine's office. A lot of freshmen are scared of her, but I'm not; she talks to me like an adult. She'll say, 'So what

should we do?' And I tell her, 'Well, I guess I should get another detention.'"

And, in spite of the tension between them, when asked to name her biggest supporter this year, Joyce says without hesitation, "Mrs. Roberts."

"It's the fun class," she says. "Mrs. Roberts and I fight a lot because we're both stubborn, but I'm her favorite, and she's my favorite, too. I talk to her about everything, and she makes me redo work that she thinks I can do better — even for other classes."

"That's interesting," Roberts later responds, "because she doesn't always like to show her true self. She's smart; she grasps concepts right away, then turns to help the other students — but quietly. Her 'tough girl' façade is falling away."

Joyce plans a future as a zoologist veterinarian, but this summer, she will be busy with Spanish classes and, she

hopes, a part-time job at Wendy's. Then, she says, she's looking forward to next year, when she'll no longer be a freshman. "The college kids hate us," she says. "It's awkward. Everywhere you go they're staring you down. One told me he went to college to get away from annoying high school kids."

"But you know what? I don't really care. They'll get over it because we're not going anywhere. Early College is our school."

Uland Ralston

It's probably typical behavior for high school boys: While one team of students presents its findings for a World War II history project, four other boys sit with heads together, cracking jokes and being mildly disruptive.

What isn't typical is Uland Ralston's next move. Without saying a word, Uland picks up his pen and paper and moves to the front of the class,



Uland Ralston says enrolling at Early College "was a smart decision." His many interests have led him to consider nursing, architecture and carpentry as possible careers.



“I don’t cheat, not even a little, and that makes an **impression** on teachers.”

– *Student Uland Ralston*

obviously bored with their antics. Leaning forward in his new seat, he proceeds to take notes.

For Uland, learning is the whole point. Asked whether enrolling in Lorain County ECHS was a good decision, he answers immediately, “It was a *smart* decision. Being here is a great privilege. Once I heard about this school, I wanted to come. What an opportunity, to go to school without getting into debt! I won’t ever take this school for granted.”

Yet, his classmates regard him as anything but a nerd. On the last day of school, Uland’s classmates named him “Most Likely to Succeed,” but they also voted him “Best Athlete” for his accomplishments in wrestling and baseball at Southview High School, his home school and where he participates in extracurricular activities.

He accepts their accolades with good nature and a big dose of humility. Uland lives in South Lorain with his parents and 12-year-old brother. “This is a good kid,” says history teacher Mike Kishman. “A *really* good kid. And his parents are very strict with him.”

“They definitely push me,” Uland agrees. “But when I get good grades, they commend me, too. They’re so good about that, and it makes me want to do even better.”

Just as strong an influence in Uland’s life is his religious faith. “It keeps my

priorities straight,” he says, “and keeps me morally honest. I don’t cheat, not even a little, and that makes an impression on teachers. I like to have people think highly of me.”

In math class, Uland looks as if he’s not paying attention while teacher Pamela Hanshumaker explains slope intercepts and turning tables back into equations. “When they ask you if two lines are parallel,” she says, turning from the board, “you can say ‘yes’ if they have the same slope, right?” Several times, Hanshumaker has to ask the students to focus. She’s losing a few, but she knows not to worry about Uland.

“He figures out the process for himself,” she says. “He extrapolates before it’s taught. When he’s talking, I know he’s helping another student who doesn’t understand something.”

Last winter, Uland already expressed concern that he needed to “start focusing on what I want to do with my life.” He had too many interests and possible goals, and he felt scattered. Sometimes, he said, he wanted to be a nurse, but he thought he could be more creative and put his math skills to work as an architect. He likes working with his hands, too, so he also was considering carpentry.

By year’s end, though he hadn’t pared down his options, he had given them a new twist: “I’m leaning toward running my own business.

“I’m seeing ideas in my head, seeing

how I can be my own boss and set my own hours. If I don't want to work, I won't have to. I like that," Uland says, laughing.

For now, he'll just relish the 4.0 grade-point average he earned for his freshman year, an achievement he describes as "my biggest success," along with what he calls "the freedoms of Early College" — a huge campus to roam and permission to take classes that test his abilities.

Emily MacMahan

"There's so much drama going on, it's like, 'Yeah, shut up and get over it.' I thought I would be going to school with smart kids, funny, nerdy, smart kids, but I know a lot of stupid kids. I'm conceited, I know. Everyone needs to rant, you know? But public school forces me to be more personable..."

And on and on she talks. Emily

MacMahan, home schooled until this year when she enrolled in Lorain County ECHS, has a lifetime of pent-up self-expression to let loose. Sitting in a neighborhood diner with a glass of water in front of her, Emily clearly enjoys talking about her dreams and decisions. She gestures with her hands, her straight-cut hair barely moving as she sits, composed and confident, making an imprint with her words. Her teachers say she's come out of her shell. No kidding. Emily wants to be an artist. That ambition was her primary reason for enrolling in Lorain County ECHS ("I'm one step closer to being an artist") and so far, she has no regrets.

"Are you kidding? I would *so* do this again," she says. "I've done a few pictures I thought were really good, and this school was so different from what I knew before." Emily's pre-Early College education was referred to as

"unschooling," a child-led learning approach based on the student's interests — in Emily's case, reading and art.

When Emily's mother told her about Lorain County ECHS, Emily saw the advantage right away, but she had to consider one unusual factor: In her home schooling, Emily was positioned to enter the 10th grade. In order to attend Lorain County ECHS, she would have to enroll as a freshman. She decided she would be a better artist with Early College training.

An only child, Emily grew up around people who draw. Her father does "aviation art" painting airplanes, and an uncle and cousin work at airbrushing and pin striping cars. She carries on the family tradition in her own way, as an active member of the Anime Society, a national group for fans of Japanese animation.

Her eyes grow widest, though, when



Home schooled until she enrolled in Early College, freshman Emily MacMahan says the school has helped her get "one step closer to being an artist."

“I said to myself, *‘This is crazy!*
I can understand this stuff if I really want to.’”

— Student *Emily MacMahan*

she speaks of her other passion: participating in medieval re-enactments with her mother. Here, too, Emily displays both her artistic talent and her interest in Japanese characters, as she designs and sews costumes for the medieval character she created, Tanaka Kiyoko.

“Kiyō means ‘pure’ in Japanese,” Emily says. “That’s supposed to be funny because I’m kind of evil sometimes.” She and her mother, Sharyn MacMahan, attend weekend re-enactments throughout the year and a two-week festival each summer.

But art isn’t the only talent that Emily is developing at Lorain County ECHS. To her own surprise, she became a peer tutor in math, helping a fellow student for an hour after school each day.

“It’s funny because when I first started here, I had a D in math. I hadn’t been studying it so much along the way. But then I said to myself, ‘This is crazy! I can understand this stuff if I really want to.’ Mrs. Hanshumaker helped me catch up, and now look, I’m helping someone else.”

Emily already knows she wants to attend the Columbus School of Art & Design after she graduates. “From there,



who knows — an illustrator, a fashion designer, maybe both,” she says.

“Married, two kids, happy.”

But behind the teen prattling is developing wisdom. Asked what she would change about Lorain County ECHS, she replies, “Nothing, because everything you experience makes you who you are. If there was something different about the school, I wouldn’t be who I am, I’d be a little different. It’s all part of my path. Get it?”

For the summer, though, Emily’s plans are less philosophical: “Get a job. Cut my hair and dye it two different colors. That way, people will know who I am.” ■



About the storyteller

A Cleveland-based freelance writer, Mary Mihaly specializes in travel, health and lifestyle reporting. Her work appears in national magazines,

including *Continental*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Yoga Journal*, *Robb Report*, *Country Living* and many more.

Every Student Deserves a Legacy

This book is dedicated to the thousands of teachers, students, parents, school leaders and community members working to improve education. For every story we've told of courage and commitment, of difficult times and hard-won progress, hundreds more remain untold. By sharing the struggles, frustrations and triumphs of these few, we pay tribute to all who work for change in our schools.

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