



Fast Track

Graduates of Ohio's Early College High Schools set a pace for early success

Excerpt:
Paul





Paul Hovan

Graduate of Canton Early College High School.
Attending Rochester Institute of Technology, studying animation.

Deafness couldn't keep him from being first in family to get degree

Born profoundly deaf, Paul Hovan always struggled to find schools that would treat him like a capable student and provide the resources for him to learn. He and his family didn't hold high hopes when, after years of frustration and even moving across country searching for supportive classrooms, they learned about a new school called Canton Early College High School.

Their doubts proved to be unfounded. What they discovered in Early College High School was a place where teachers didn't consider Hovan's deafness an obstacle to his ability to work on a college level – an environment that launched him into the future they always believed he could have.

Now Hovan is studying 3D animation and digital art at Rochester Institute of Technology, having already be-

come the first member of his family to get a college diploma by earning an associate's degree during high school.

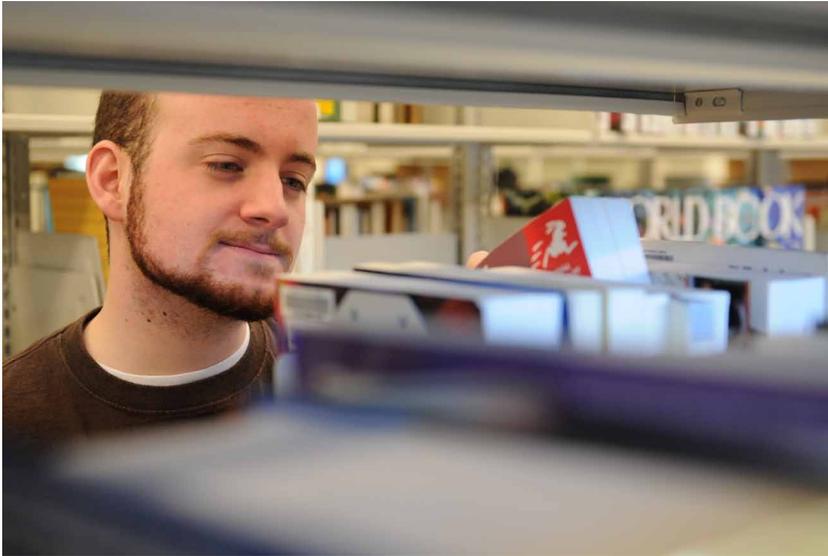
Despite how well Hovan's time at Canton ECHS turned out, the transition from schools where teachers accepted or even overestimated his limits to one where teachers helped him overcome them got off to a rough start.

"It wasn't easy," said Paul's mother, Shawana Hovan. One of only two deaf students in the ECHS program, Hovan was behind in several subjects, particularly those for which reading and writing were central. Having learned to communicate in American Sign Language (ASL), English was effectively a second language.

"It has been and probably will continue to be a challenge for me. American Sign Language is completely different from English," said Hovan. "Those signs are not 100% of each word in English. For example, in English, 'How are you?' In ASL, they sign, 'how you?' There is no 'are.'"

As a freshman, he was not yet constructing English sentences. But he was now in a school with an interpreter, tutors and committed educators who would grow to care about him.

"Most of the teachers were really helpful. I mean they



At Canton Early College High School, teachers didn't consider Paul Hovan's deafness an obstacle to his ability to work on a college level.

really wanted to help every ECHS student to succeed,” Hovan said. “This is big deal to them. If a student wanted extra help, the teachers were more than willing to see them after school.”

From the moment that ECHS English teacher Debbie Turner met Hovan, she never considered his deafness an obstacle.

“I never thought of Paul as not being capable – he was very fluent and articulate – I know him from the very beginning as someone who was excited about the program and willing to learn,” she said.

“There were times when we butted heads. I knew that he could do it. I held his toes to the fire and held him accountable. As a result, our relationship wasn't always sunshine and light. I grew from that because I learned about who he was a person – what would motivate him and not motivate him. We grew very close eventually, but it was that tension that brought us to that point.”

To Hovan's mother, seeing her son engage and love Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Turner's class was a pivotal moment in Hovan's growth as a student. Turner remembers it that way as well.

“Paul was not aware of the meanings of language beyond the literal,” said Turner. “One of the discoveries that made *Romeo and Juliet* so pleasurable for him was that I helped him (and my other students) deconstruct the layers of language beyond the literal.

“He had never been asked to do that before. With each step that he took toward understanding literature and the use of language – metaphor, simile — I could see him blossom. He engaged in the classroom conversations... Mrs. Black [the interpreter] would tell him to slow

down because he would sign so quickly. His mind was working so quickly that his hands couldn't keep up.”

Even as he struggled through English and social studies, Hovan excelled in art and design. As a junior, he won a city-wide young inventors contest by making

a chandelier out of recycled materials. His skills in welding and electrical wiring led to a commission for another chandelier through the organization Arts in Stark County.

Hovan's experiences at ECHS were especially welcome given his earlier difficulties.

His parents believed that, given the proper environment and resources, their son possessed the abilities to engage and understand all of the subjects that any hearing child would. But throughout elementary and middle school, those bright spots were the exception, not the norm.

Early on, his school district provided a caring and engaged interpreter for him. But good interpreters – the essential coupling between Hovan and his ability to learn – came and went from the school system. He was often lumped him into classrooms with students who had severe mental and learning disabilities. He had teachers who tried to communicate with deaf students by yelling and classes in which he was meant to learn alongside kids “who could not count change or tie their shoes.”

The Hovans were so frustrated that they began to sue the school district to get Hovan an interpreter. Looking at that long road, they instead decided to uproot the family – including two older siblings who were months from graduating from high school — and move to the Washington, DC, area so that he could attend the Maryland School for the Deaf.

“My family has sacrificed a great deal to try and give me the best opportunities,” Hovan said.

But that move turned out to be much harder than they ever could have anticipated. An outsider to the deaf culture the school represented, Hovan was teased, bullied and iso-

lates — even punched in the throat by another student.

Then he was told by one teacher not to bother with trying to read beyond a third-grade level. It wasn't necessary, she said, because "the government would take care of him."

Horrified, Hovan's mother pulled him out of the school. On discovering that the Canton City School district had hired a good interpreter, the family moved back to northeast Ohio.

"It got to a point where he was beginning to not like who he was," she said.

Once he enrolled in ECHS and connected with teachers, Hovan found his way to what he wanted to do. In his senior year, Hovan won a national award for graphic arts for digital photography from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) and was flown to visit its Rochester campus for a weekend, along with his family.

Hovan was offered a scholarship to NTID as he logged his next major accomplishments — he earned a black belt in karate, then got his associate's degree from Stark State College. He also gave his first public speech.

"Before I graduated, my family and I went to an ECHS recognition dinner for the graduates," said Hovan — the evening one of his favorite memories of high school. "They were really touched when I delivered my speech. I thanked the teachers, students, friends, workers and even my family. Some people were tearing up while I was sign-

ing, even strangers whom I never met."

At RIT, Hovan is living in an all-deaf dorm away from home for the first time in his life. A relevant milestone for any student, living independently was essential for Hovan.

Early on, his mother completed a master interpreter-training program and served as his primary connection to the hearing world most of his life. "Even though we sign, and we're his family and we love him, would you want your mother interpreting for you?" said Shawana. "He needs to have those social skills and learn to negotiate and compromise.

"It's nice to see him building relationships outside of our family."

All of the professors Hovan works with at RIT sign, and there are more than 1,500 other students from all over the country with varying degrees of hearing loss.

He and his roommate have discussed moving into an apartment together.

Hovan and his family said they feel like they've "won the lottery" with his college education.

Hovan is grateful that he got to be one of the first 100 students to enter ECHS. "All the extra effort that the teachers, tutors and my parents put into helping me on that journey through ECHS and English has made it possible for me attend the college I wanted to."

—Tracy Zollinger Turner

Early College High Schools in Ohio

Across Ohio, early college high schools are changing what it means to be a college student. These schools take the young teenagers who are least likely to attend college and most likely to be performing below grade level, then put them in an atmosphere with high levels of support and high expectations. They allow students to start taking college courses in grade 9 or 10 and earn up to 60 hours of college credit by the time they graduate from high school.

The nine Ohio Early College High Schools in the KnowledgeWorks network are showing remarkable results. They report an average graduation rate of 91 percent and more than one in three ECHS students graduate with a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associate's degree. Others earn substantial college credits that speed their journey toward a degree.

More than 90 percent of ECHS 10th graders scored proficient or higher on the Ohio Graduation Test in reading, writing, mathematics and social studies, outperform-

ing the state average. Greater percentages of students from ECHS schools scored accelerated or advanced on Ohio state achievement tests than students at comparable high schools, suggesting that they are more college ready.

What happens when these young adults — almost all of them the first in their families to attend college or students who likely would not continue their education without the boost of ECHS — move beyond the carefully structured and nurturing environments of their high schools? Research shows that they are more likely to enroll in and complete college.

But research data is only part of the answer. Each of the remarkable young adults who has graduated from an Early College High School has a unique story of accomplishment and challenge. Each has a dream as individual as his or her journey. To learn more about early college high schools or meet other ECHS alumni, please go to www.OhioEducationMatters.org.