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DAYTON EARLY COLLEGE ACADEMY, ONE OF FIRST IN NATION, GROOMS URBAN STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE

DAYTON, Ohio — When veteran educators Tom Lasley and Tim Nealon started an early college high school on the University of Dayton’s campus last fall, they threw away the book and created their own model of what a high school could be.

There are no grades at the Dayton Early College Academy, a Dayton public high school. The student-teacher ratio is 16-1, about half that of a traditional urban public school classroom. Teachers can be found sitting on the porches or in the living rooms of families, discussing personalized learning plans for their children that include a demanding curriculum, interdisciplinary projects and college coursework.

As this experimental high school winds up its first year of operation, educators point to promising signs that the unusual public school housed on a Catholic campus is making a difference. Of DECA’s 89 ninth graders, 19 have successfully taken college classes at either the University of Dayton or Sinclair Community College. The attendance rate is nearly perfect, hovering at 96 percent for the year. Next year’s class is full, with a waiting list of 75 students.

“We have many bright and capable secondary students who are not well served in the traditional classroom setting. The DECA program gives these students an opportunity to shine,” said Dayton Public Schools Superintendent Percy Mack. “Our students are not only succeeding, they are succeeding in college-level studies. And for the first time, many are seeing a future for themselves that involves a college degree.”

The school has been featured in the national press and at educators’ conferences. Art Levine, professor and president of Teachers College at Columbia University, a national leader in education reform, called DECA “one of the most extraordinary experiments I’ve seen” during a January visit to campus. Researchers from Harvard University and American Institutes for Research are closely monitoring the students’ progress. DECA is the first early college high school in Ohio and one of only 19 such schools nationwide that opened last fall.

“We created a public high school on a private campus, with a minimum number of culture clashes. That’s no small endeavor,” said Thomas Lasley, dean of the School of Education and

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Allied Professions. “If Dayton Public Schools comes up with other viable alternatives like this, Dayton can become a leader in secondary education nationally.”

Early college high schools, a new and growing movement in secondary education, are designed to reach students who have lots of academic potential but have not been successful in more traditional settings. The schools target first-generation college students from low-income neighborhoods who might not otherwise be able to attend college. About 80 percent of students enrolled in the Dayton Early College Academy are African-American. DECA students can earn up to two years of college credit while in high school, so the University of Dayton is creating its own pipeline of prospective minority students.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided start-up funding for DECA, and the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Ohio’s largest public education philanthropy, is guiding the development of schools in the state. In the fall, Lorain Community College and Youngstown State University plan to open similar schools.

Students say they enjoy the freedom of going to school on a college campus and describe the curriculum as challenging. “I came here for the college experience,” said Chelsea Pope, 15, over a pizza lunch. “My mom wants me to come back. She says if I don’t, I’m missing out on a great opportunity to start college classes early.”

On a spring morning, one group of students in the Caldwell Street Center on campus learns about the Dust Bowl and wind erosion, while another works on a literary analysis of John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men. They’ve also tackled the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and the ethnic conflict in Rwanda.

“The biggest thing I’ve enjoyed this year is watching kids grow,” said Elton Griffith, a former social worker and outdoor educator who teaches social studies and history. “We’re looking for kids willing to work, kids with a support network, kids who understand the privilege education can give them.”

Griffith, who holds a master’s degree in education, devotes about 60 hours a week to his job, which includes after-hours tutoring and field trips. “Some of these kids were not reading at grade level, and now practically everyone knows how to write a thesis statement.”

Tim Nealon, a veteran teacher and administrator in Dayton Public Schools, came out of retirement to help UD launch the school. “This is not a wrapped, ribboned and packaged tightly high school,” he said. “We’ve grown the culture to support continuous improvement.”

It’s too early to judge this alternative school’s success, but it’s easy to sense the energy of the students, involvement of the parents and dedication of the staff. Nealon uses the words “spark,” “passion” and “soulful” to describe the students he seeks for the school.

“DECA teachers share a personalized journey with the kids,” he said. “It’s a model clearly on target for what we need in our community. We’ve had so many victories building hope back into these kids.”

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