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Early College Kindergarten

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An innovative high school at the University of Dayton is breaking new ground with plans to open the nation's first K-12 early college school this fall.

DECAPREP will launch Aug. 15 with the same primary goal as its partner school, the Dayton Early College Academy: to prepare urban students to go to college.

"DECAPREP will focus on closing the skill gap many of our incoming junior and senior high school students face at DECA," said Judy Hennessey, DECA superintendent and CEO.

While other school districts in the U.S. have implemented early college models in existing elementary schools, DECAPREP is the first elementary school founded as an early college school, according to Jobs for the Future, which manages the Early College High School Initiative.

Hennessey said the elementary school will have a personalized curriculum with a focus on reading, character development and establishing a culture of academic rigor and success.

Parent involvement is critical to student success at DECAPREP, Hennessey said, and all parents or guardians are required to participate in "Parent Academies" and regular meetings with teachers.

"If we expect our students to give us their best effort, they need to know that those around them are supporting them, that they won't slip through the cracks," she said.

DECAPREP is funded through a combination of federal, state and foundation grants, including a \$718,000 Race to the Top Innovative School federal grant. The school will open with 16 faculty and 246 students in kindergarten and grades 1, 2 and 6 with an additional grade added each year. It will occupy the former Corpus Christi elementary school campus at 200 Homewood Ave. in Dayton.

"We're excited about being able to do something new, to have the opportunity to try things that can make a difference for children," said Diane Blackburn, DECAPREP principal.

Blackburn previously served seven years as a middle school principal at Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy and taught early childhood education and kindergarten licensure for 18 years at the University of Cincinnati.

The Dayton Early College Academy — Ohio's first early college — opened in 2003 as a partnership between the University of

Dayton and Dayton Public Schools with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Early College High School Initiative and its Ohio-based intermediary, KnowledgeWorks Foundation. DECA reorganized in 2007 as a charter school operated by the University of Dayton and enrolled seventh-graders for the first time in 2008.

"As our pioneering early college high school, it seems appropriate that DECA would take a leadership role and be out front in linking the education pipeline from primary school and into college," said Andrea Mulkey, national director of EDWorks Fast Track, a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks.

"We have nearly a decade of evidence that shows Fast Track early college students succeeding in rigorous academic environments, outperforming their cohorts and becoming better prepared for college, so it makes sense to add lower grades to the pipeline and continue to replicate this success."

DECA primarily serves students who are underrepresented in higher education, unprepared academically to meet college readiness standards, unable to pay for college and often first-generation college students. Students receive substantial personal attention while pursuing their academic interests. To graduate, they must complete a minimum of nine credit hours of college courses.

DECA graduated its sixth class this month, and all 170 of its graduates have attended college, with more than 85 percent graduated or still enrolled.

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