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Middle School to College

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This fall, 75 Dayton seventh-graders will get a head start on their college dreams.

The Dayton Early College Academy — an innovative high school that rigorously prepares students from low-income, urban families to go to college — is opening its doors to middle-school students for the first time.

"We need more time to get our students ready for college," DECA Principal Judy Hennessey said of the decision to accept a seventh-grade class. "Students who come in at ninth grade with weak skills in reading and mathematics simply cannot catch up in just two years and be prepared to deal with the demanding college courses they must take while attending DECA."

As of the 2007-08 school year, only 20 of the 160 early college high schools in the U.S. enrolled middle-school students, according to KnowledgeWorks Foundation, one of the partner organizations involved in the national Early College High School Initiative.

"Because of the demographics of early college students, most enter ninth grade at fourth-grade math levels and sixth-grade reading levels. If the early colleges can reach the students earlier, they can bridge those gaps and place them on a faster pace to move seamlessly between high school and college courses," said Andrea Mulkey, KnowledgeWorks early college high schools program manager.

Just three "Middle School to College" schools started as high schools and, like DECA, added the younger classes a few years later, Mulkey said. But that number could be on the rise, as other early college high schools look to DECA and the other conversion schools as a model.

DECA has had success with the 9-12 model. Everyone of the school's 80 graduates has been accepted to college. But many students needed summer sessions or a fifth year to complete the school's demanding requirements, Hennessey said.

Students must advance through six gateways to graduate — rather than the traditional four grade levels — by achieving personalized, academic benchmarks. They must also complete a minimum of nine credit hours of college courses while still in high school, though most students exceed the requirement.

DECA will continue to enroll students entering ninth grade, but acceptance may become more selective as an increasing emphasis is placed on students to start the program in middle school, Hennessey said.

This year's plan to enroll two classes — 75 seventh-graders and 84 ninth-graders — brings DECA's total expected enrollment to 312, the school's highest since it opened in 2003.

Founded by the University of Dayton in partnership with Dayton Public Schools, DECA is the first early college high school in Ohio and the only charter school in the nation operated by a Catholic university. The addition of a seventh-grade cohort further sets DECA apart as a pioneer in preparing students to get into and succeed in college.

And its proven track record of preparing its graduates to attend college — many of whom are the first in their families to pursue a degree — continues to be the main attraction for parents and students.

Dianne Brown said she jumped at the chance to enroll her seventh-grade daughter, Alicia, in DECA as soon as she heard the school was expanding to include middle-school students. Brown recently moved to Dayton and first learned about DECA in May while watching the news.

"I heard them ask, 'How would it feel to have 100 percent of your graduates go to college?' " she said. "I thought that was amazing. My daughter wasn't being challenged at her old school, and I didn't want her to just get assigned extra work. I want her to be prepared for college."

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or www.udayton.edu/news/articles/2008/07/middle_school_to_college.php