

5-year program offers degrees to high schoolers

By JULIE MACK
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KALAMAZOO — Kalamazoo County's nine school districts are launching a new program in which students can earn a degree or certificate from Kalamazoo Valley Community College during a "13th grade" in high school.

Known as Early/Middle College, tuition and fees will be paid by school districts, which will collect the state's per-pupil foundation allowance for those students, school superintendents told the Kalamazoo Gazette (<http://bit.ly/1sTeR7>).

The Schoolcraft and Gull Lake school districts are piloting the program this school year. It is tentatively scheduled for implementation in fall 2015 at the other seven districts — Kalamazoo, Portage, Vicksburg, Comstock, Parchment, Galesburg-Augusta and Climax-Scotts — pending approval of the individual school boards, which is currently under way.

"Since college education is more important and more expensive than ever, we believe this will be a potentially powerful option for students," said David Campbell, superintendent of the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency.

In essence, the superintendents said, the Early/Middle College program is an expansion of dual enrollment, the program that allows Michigan high school students to take college classes for free. It also builds on Kalamazoo County's Education for Employment and Education for the Arts, which offer career and technical education classes.

The big difference from dual enrollment and EPE/EFA: Rather than take random classes for college credit, Early/Middle College students will focus on a specific program of study. Also, they will delay high school graduation for a year, and they will use that fifth year of high school to potentially earn an associate's degree or vocational certificate from KVCC.

While it will take those students five years to graduate high school, once they do, they'll be ready to either enter the workforce in a skilled trade or transfer to a four-year college as a junior.

Early/Middle College initially will offer seven programs of study: An associate's degree for students transferring to a four-year college; an associate's degree in graphic design or machine-tool technology; a certificate in graphic design or machine-tool technology, and a certificate of completion to be a welder or personal computer support technician.

The programs for welders, machinists, computer technicians and graphic designers were chosen based on local job demand, school officials said.

"Local manufacturers and businesses are very interested in this," said Deb Miller, who oversees EPE/EFA. "We're keeping them in the loop."

Carrie Pickett-Erway, president/CEO of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, said she and others see Early/Middle College as a critical part of efforts to create a "cradle-to-career" education system in Kalamazoo County.

"This is a big moment for the community," Pickett-Erway said. "It's very exciting."

The program "is a direct path from high school to college to jobs in high demand," Pickett-Erway said. It's also a big deal for students who want to earn a four-year degree, she said. Campbell and Pickett-

Erway said local officials have talked for years about having an Early/Middle College here.

EMC "is something many people have been trying to bring to life for almost 10 years, but it's always gotten stalled at different points because of funding or infrastructure issues," she said.

What made a difference this time: The Learning Network of Greater Kalamazoo, which is operated through the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, kicked in \$150,000 for the planning process, and KVCC, KRESA and the Lumina Foundation also offered support.

That paid for people to work on putting the necessary pieces in place. The main point person has been Jim Murphy, who works for KRESA.

A big part of the process is coordinating among nine school districts with different ideas of how EMC would best work in their district, as well as working with KVCC and the EPE/EFA programs.

"It's a difficult thing to get off the ground," Campbell said.

He said the program is being "customized" and will operate a little differently in each high school.

But in general, most students will enter the Early/Middle College program as a sophomore by taking a college success strategies course at their home high school.

That course, which is required for entrance into EMC, will teach the study skills that students need for college-level classes — such as how to take notes and study effectively for a test.

EMC students would then take dual-enrollment classes at KVCC or specific courses that offer college credit through EPE and EFA during their junior and senior year, school officials said.

The students' fifth year of high school would be mainly spent at KVCC finishing up their college program of study, although students could take classes such as their home high school, such as band or choir.

While they are taking college classes, students must participate in "seminar" — a regular meeting of EMC students to talk about their experiences and share tips and resources. Each EMC student also will be assigned a mentor, who will help oversee their progress.

The college strategies class, seminar meetings and mentors are considered key to helping teenagers make the transition to higher education and stay on track.

Students can enter the EMC program after sophomore year, but they are still required to take the college strategies class first and may not be able to finish the college program by the end of their fifth year of high school.

The associate's degree programs require students to earn 62 credit hours, which is equivalent to four or five full-time semesters. The certificate programs run between 10 and 32 hours.

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