



Life in the fast lane: County doesn't lag in early college trend

GENESEE COUNTY

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It's a high school world absent the icons and rituals - no cheerleaders, football games or prom night.

QUICK TAKE

And diplomas are earned on a college campus.

It's a growing phenomenon cropping up around the nation. Called early and middle colleges, crafted to blend the high school and college experience, they're hitting Genesee County.

In the same year, two groundbreaking local programs are being offered to teens who can earn a high school diploma and essentially free college credits in one academic package.

"I think it's the future of education," said Winston Stoodly, a former Fenton Board of Education member who teaches social studies at the new Carman Park-Baker Academy set to open today. "It's on the cutting edge."

The Baker career academy begins just weeks after the Genesee Early College started at the University of Michigan-Flint.

The two are bold experiments that may redefine the character of high school life.

Mott Middle College also offers a dual enrollment program at Mott Community College's campus, but it is geared more toward at-risk youths across the county.

The concept for the new programs is to save time and money through a rigorous dual-enrollment curriculum in a college environment while stressing relevancy and career preparation.

Students who are accepted agree to kind of a split life, graduating from high school along with an associate's degree or up to two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree within five years.

And it's tuition free.

There is a catch. Depending on home districts and scheduling, some teens trade traditional high school pastimes - the chance to play a sport, perform in the band and maybe even attend dances - for the

jump-start to college.

It's not for everyone, educators and parents say.

Stoody, a onetime commodities trader in Chicago, said classes at the new Baker academy are taught by people who have real-life experiences.

Classes link students to professionals and steer them toward degrees in such areas as medical technology, computer animation and graphics.

"They are smaller, integrated schools with more flexible schedules," said Stoody. "Kids can make connections to the professional world and build skills they can use right away. It makes education more engaging and more meaningful."

The curriculum of the early college at UM-Flint heavily emphasizes math and science and preparation for high-demand health careers.

Students, who attend both high school classes and regular college classes on campus through the day, will do work with hospitals and high-level health research.

For Carmen Hackett, 15, of Davison, who wants to attend medical school, it's a hard-to-turn-down path.

But it also meant the junior, who has been cheerleading since seventh grade and was poised to be on Davison High School's varsity cheer team, had to give up the activity.

"She still goes to the games on Friday nights and watches all of her friends cheering. That was hard," said her mother, Cheryl. "But she knows this is an exceptional opportunity to get a two-year head start (on college)."

Cheryl Hackett said that for high achievers, an early college might be a better fit. Plus, the transition won't be as hard for students who start as freshmen in the future.

"The first week was rough for (Carmen) because you get thrown right into it, and you're used to all of your friends," Cheryl Hackett said. "She's mixed in with people who are more mature than her as far as age, and she's getting used to the college way of life.

"It's been an adjustment."

But students also get college world perks. At UM-Flint, students can join any of the hundreds of clubs and activities except for Greek life.

At Baker's academy, there's already talk of creating clubs and hosting dances.

"There are some things you miss out on," said Cody Rumsey, 16, of Burton, who is attending Baker's academy and hopes to someday do car restoration work. "But I feel like it's going to help me learn a lot about what I want to do, and it's going to save me half the money."

Genesee Early College student Shurooq Hasan, 15, said she misses walking to class with friends and seeing them in the hallways, but this "speeds everything up."

Still, having free time between classes to eat lunch at the pavilion or study at the library is a new concept.

"It's different because nobody is watching over you," she said. "You're still restricted, but you feel like you have the freedom of college students."

Early colleges

Since 2002, partners of the national Early College High School Initiative have started or redesigned more than 130 schools in 24 states.

Local initiatives:

- Mott Middle College at the Mott Community College campus: Geared toward at-risk youth who may need a fresh start. Includes dual enrollment in high school and college classes, career preparation with work internships, volunteer opportunities and work shadowing, off-site field trips, and community service.

www.geneseeisd.org

Carman Park-Baker Career Academy at Baker College of Flint: Focuses on career preparation in areas of interest. Includes dual enrollment in high school and Baker College classes, work experience, small class size and all of Baker College's facilities and services.

www.baker.edu/academy

Genesee Early College at the University of Michigan-Flint: Designed to prepare students for health careers. Includes clinical internships, strong emphasis on math and science, 60 transferable undergraduate college credits from UM-Flint, chance to participate in most campus clubs and events, partnerships with local hospitals and health organizations.

www.geneseeeearlycollege.org

Source: Respective Web sites.

The early college initiative was among the recommendations made by the Cherry Commission - led by Lt. Gov. John D. Cherry Jr. of Vienna Township - to double the number of state residents attending college.

Proponents say putting high-schoolers on a college campus makes them more motivated to do well and offers a positive taste of higher education.

Through the national Early College High School Initiative, more than 130 such schools have started across the country since 2002.

On a visit to Flint two weeks ago, Gov. Jennifer Granholm told early college students they "are on the front lines of a movement in education" and will help transform the economy.

"Students will graduate with an unparalleled high school experience," Gary Weisserman, UM-Flint's director of Early College and K-16 initiatives, said recently.

"This is, I believe, a watershed moment not just for Genesee County but for the state of Michigan."

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