

Savannah-Chatham Early College outcomes shine

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-Gabriella Garcia-Pardo / Savannah Morning News Early College students leave their classes at Savannah State University to head back to their high school campus. The mission of the program is to "ignite a passion for learning and teaching at high levels."



Gabriella Garcia-Pardo/Savannah Morning News

The Early College program prepares advanced high school students for college by allowing them to take college courses while still in high school. The vision of the program is "From school to the world: All students prepared for productive futures."

By [Jenel Few](#)

There's a little school house in Garden City where every student maintains above-average grades, graduates and goes to college.

It's a place where the End of Course Test pass rate is 82 percent to 100 percent in all subject areas, and the student body is truly diverse.

Early College is the kind of public school specialty program that parents dream of getting their children into. But very few know it is available to them.

Savannah Early College officials recently worked to spread the good news about what they're doing as part of the National Early College Week celebration to create awareness about the Early College model. The model is based on the idea that high school students will complete college courses as they're completing a high school diploma if they're given academic and financial support for motivation. The program was designed to get more low-income, first-generation college attendees, English language learners and students of color into college. Savannah Early College enrolls 221 students; 80 percent of the seats are reserved for underrepresented groups.

"Early College is such a well-kept secret. The kids are outstanding and the amount of scholarships they have earned is just remarkable," said Savannah-Chatham public schools Superintendent Thomas Lockamy. "If I could afford to make it a stand-alone high school it would be one of the best that I have."

One of the best

Camila Denoso, a senior at Early College, always knew she'd go to college, but she didn't realize the individual attention academic support she'd receive at the Savannah Early College high school program would prompt college recruiters to come looking for her.

"I got into Emory and UGA. And Emory is flying me out there for four days to get a feel for their campus," she said. "... They gave me a \$40,000 grant because they want me to go there. That means I will end up with everything I need to cover tuition and no loans."

The Savannah-Chatham public school system started its Early College program five years ago with financial support from a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant. Following the Early College Model, students develop college-to-career plans their freshman year and get the support they need to pass rigorous advanced-level courses. They have to pass a college entrance exam in October of their sophomore year so they can start taking college classes at Savannah State University as a high school junior. By the time they earn high school diplomas, most have already accumulated a year-and-a-half to two-year's worth of college credit.

Early College parent Lee Perry said he's delighted with what his son is accomplishing through Early College.

"Not only do they require the students to engage in accelerated learning in high school, his college courses are paid for as well," Perry said. "Next year he will be a full-time student at Savannah State University and by the time he gets his diploma he will have completed a year and a half of college."

Last semester Savannah Early College had 76 high school juniors and seniors who enrolled in college and completed 524 college credit hours.

"We're producing students who go to college and get degrees," said Savannah Early College Principal Caroline Gordon-Jelks.

Doing well

Savannah Early College has graduates enrolled in colleges and universities all over the country. Right here in Georgia, Sarah Stidley is a junior at the University of Georgia. Vernon Hall is a junior at Georgia State and Jamar Rawls is a Georgia Tech freshman.

“I wasn’t always focused,” said Hall. “But teachers like Mr. (Doug) Kearse are great mentors. They help you make the right decisions in life and at school. The way the school is set up makes you focus on college goals and strive to do well.”

Stidley said attending Early College was the best decision she’s ever made.

“I came into UGA with 26 credits,” she said. “(Advanced Placement) credits are great, but at Early College I got actual college course credit out of the way. I started coursework for my major in my freshman year of college.”

Early College has a small staff with 13 teachers and one counselor. They have a prom and some intramural pick-up games, but anyone who wants to march in the band or play organized ball must provide their own transportation and play at their home school. A tutorial system is built into the academic program to ensure students maintain an 81 average or higher.

Those who aren’t ready to take college classes in their junior year can’t continue in the program. But each year more than 90 percent are ready. And their academic success has created waves in the district.

Although Early College has its own campus — the annex building across from Groves High School — the students are technically enrolled at their neighborhood schools. The neighborhood schools get the credit for the Early College student outcomes. But several Early College students have had test scores and grade-point averages that are so high they have ended up being the STAR student or valedictorian of neighborhood high schools they never attended.

“Our focus is getting students ready for college early,” Gordon-Jelks said. “It takes a very focused student who is willing to give up some of their social opportunities to have a more robust academic experience in the long run.”