

## Earning Credits, Saving Money

*An early-college program in Wayne Township, Ind., is preparing students for the future and saving their parents millions of dollars in college tuition*

**A**s tight as school budgets are around the nation, family budgets in many districts often are strained even more, particularly when parents are looking at the rising costs of college. But one enterprising school system, Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township in Indianapolis, Ind., has saved parents millions of dollars in tuition.

In late May, more than 50 students walked across the stage with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree, saving parents two years

of college tuition and giving their children essential skills both for their future education and the job market. The total university, community college, and technical school credit hours earned by students will soon exceed 20,000, and with tuition costs in the area ranging from \$125 per credit hour to more than \$1,000 per credit hour, the savings for students and parents have been enormous.

### 'Best deal in town'

Like most school leaders, Indiana

Superintendent of the Year Terry Thompson is facing significant budget cuts in his district of almost 20,000 students. But Wayne Township has focused its energy on saving money for cash-strapped parents.

It's a prudent move in a district where 65 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and more than 60 percent are ethnic minorities. And, according to Assistant Superintendent Lisa Lantrip, it's also "the best deal in town."

Lantrip says students can earn two years of college credit at no cost to parents, except for the price of book rentals. The district has two high schools that offer a choice for families.

The large, comprehensive Ben Davis High School includes traditional extracurricular activities along with a comprehensive range of vocational and technical education opportunities. Ben Davis University High School is much smaller and is focused on meeting the academic college preparatory needs of students.

### Different needs, different strategies

Sheryl Garrett, principal of Ben Davis University High, says the vast majority of students earning college credit at her school will be first-generation college students. The school opened in the fall of 2007 and graduates its first class this year, with more than 98 percent of seniors on track to receive a diploma.

Overall, 75 percent of the school's total enrollment is on track to graduate, and students have earned more than 11,000 college credits. Students are recruited starting in eighth grade,



when faculty members encourage them to start seeing themselves as college-bound.

The traditional Ben Davis High School has what Principal Joel McKinney describes as “a college-going culture.” The data support his claim, as students earned more than 6,000 credits, of which more than 4,000 were earned at the career center, where students qualify for college credit as well as vocational and paraprofessional licensing. In addition, the high school’s Advanced Placement classes have more than 1,600 students enrolled—triple the number from just four years ago.

#### **Academic, vocational cooperation**

Wayne Township, which started its effort in the career center more than 10 years ago, originally was designed to offer college credits to students as they were certified in various career fields. Now, 26 classes in the center earn students both high school and college credit. Whether students are headed for college, technical school, or directly into the workforce, the advanced credits that they earn give them greater opportunities in the future.

Enriching the academic environment also has led to a significant improvement in the campus environment. When University High began

three years ago, the school had 32 suspensions among 120 students. The student body has since tripled in size, but the school had only one suspension last year. At Ben Davis High School, attendance has increased for four consecutive years and discipline referrals have decreased every semester, from more than 1,000 in 2005 to only 300 last year.

One reason for this is the ongoing commitment of the faculty, which has gained sufficient graduate school credits to qualify as university adjuncts. Teachers saw this as an opportunity rather than a burden, because more challenging classes developed students who were highly motivated and willing to collaborate.

“Our teachers consistently work together to provide support for students,” McKinney says. “This was a grassroots effort, not something that was administratively driven.” Garrett adds that her faculty has developed a “hidden curriculum—helping students learn how to advocate for their needs and get assistance when they need it.” The staff collaborates daily and grade-level teams meet every week.

When I interviewed several students, Alisha praised the “comfortable learning environment” and Justin, who had experienced difficulty earlier in his school life, described his academic challenges as “a breath of fresh air”

that created new opportunities for him. Thomas describes himself as more focused and Ladria, who had not previously considered going to college, is now firmly committed to a collegiate future.

#### **System-level success**

Wayne Township’s success goes beyond the high school level. Systematically, the district has increased rigor at all levels and for all students, not just for those identified as academically gifted.

This commitment to rigor is reflected in the fact that the district has doubled the number of students taking algebra in grades seven and eight over the past five years and increased enrollment in other advanced classes for younger students.

The fact that all this has happened during a period of economic decline and budget cuts is a reminder that improved leadership, teaching, and learning can have a dramatic impact on the lives of students—even in the most challenging of circumstances. ■

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