

"We wanted a new opportunity
for urban kids."

Every Student Deserves a Legacy | 2008 | KnowledgeWorks Foundation



Starting from Scratch

Five years in the life of Ohio's first
early college high school

**Dayton Early
College Academy**

Dayton, Ohio

Early College High Schools

College material? Students in Ohio's early college high schools are redefining the concept. Defying expectations, these students – most of whom are from low-income families, first-generation college-goers, English language learners or students of color – are attending high school and college at the same time, and succeeding at both.

As part of its Early College High Schools initiative (ECHS), KnowledgeWorks Foundation and its partners support a network of nine schools in Ohio. These schools represent a collaboration between local school districts and colleges and often are situated right on campus. Students as young as 14 or 15 divide their days between a demanding high school curriculum and college classes – where they sit next to high school graduates and do the same work.

In return for this intensive effort, high school students can earn an associate degree or 60 hours – or more – of college credit that can be applied toward a bachelor's degree.

Early college high schools target students who are from disadvantaged homes and who would be the first in their families to attend college. To help these motivated but sometimes underperforming learners, the schools are small enough so that students can work closely with instructors who not only teach core high school classes but also provide support and guidance to help them adjust to college expectations.

With these schools still young – the first opened in 2003 – results are strongly positive. As of the spring of 2008:

- Almost all early college high school students were enrolled in a college course. That included 97 percent of ninth graders and 99 percent of 10th graders.
- In April 2008, half of Ohio's early college students were on track to complete both a high school degree and an associate degree (or 60 hours of college credit) by the end of high school.
- Students had accumulated 9,192 college credits.
- Students had outperformed the state average on the reading, writing and math Ohio Graduation Tests.
- Two schools had graduated their first classes. Both surpassed the state average graduation rate – in districts where the average rate is far below the state.

Early college high schools are helping prove that intellectual challenge and academic rigor, along with the opportunity to save time and tuition dollars, are powerful ways to motivate students to succeed in serious intellectual work. They are demonstrating that old definitions no longer apply when deciding which students are college material.

On the cover:

First-year DECA student Chico Williams works on a scale model of a family home. The long-term project is part of an innovative year-long class combining fundamental math skills with real-life applications.

Dayton Early College Academy

Dayton Early College Academy opened in 2003 as the first early college high school in Ohio and one of just 21 in the nation. A partnership between Dayton Public Schools and the University of Dayton, DECA aspired to offer urban students a better alternative to traditional schools. The school would combine high school and college course work, create hands-on learning experiences driven by individual interests and foster close relationships among teachers, students and families.

The founders of the school earned widespread attention for their ambitious goals and innovative model, but even fully articulating, let alone realizing, their vision proved daunting. Finding ways to serve both average and high-achieving students, while helping the many who struggled with academic obstacles and equally troubling challenges in their personal lives, demanded tireless dedication, constant reinvention and unprecedented sacrifices by DECA's staff.

Few disputed DECA's remarkable potential, but supporters and skeptics alike closely monitored the school for signs of progress or peril. Laboring under this intense scrutiny, with so much at stake and only their own ideas to guide them, a hopeful corps of novice teachers, veteran educators and anxious families launched a daring experiment to create an entirely new kind of high school.



Student teacher Tiffany Minton works with students Kayla Davis and Pearlita Jennings during a language arts class.

Starting from Scratch

Five years in the life of Ohio's first early college high school

By Phil Neal

On a cool early morning in October 2003, Elton Griffith strides across the University of Dayton campus with a strong sense of purpose and genuine optimism. His thin, athletic frame and ready smile – not to mention long dreadlocks and visible body art – make it easy to mistake him for an eager student en route to a favorite class. In reality, he is a teacher working to create a new kind of high school.



For more than eight months, Griffith has spent nearly every day working with a small team of teachers and administrators on a bold, even startling plan to reinvent urban education. With little more than a tantalizing vision to guide them, they have created a school designed to bring the dream of a college education within the reach of struggling underserved students. They have forged a partnership between the university and one of the state's lowest-ranked public school districts, bringing nearly 100 ninth graders onto campus for a mix of high school work, college classes and hands-on learning.

Having opened its doors with no fixed location, the Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) holds classes all over campus, wherever the university has free space. For now, Griffith's office is in the main library, a towering stone building near the heart of campus. As he takes the elevator up to the fourth floor, he thinks ahead to his day. With any luck, the hour or so before his first class will be enough to finalize the individualized lessons he stayed up late preparing.

Lost in thought, he unlocks and opens the door to his office. The smell hits him first: rotting meat. Flipping on the lights, he surveys the scene, too shocked to react. Someone has strewn garbage all over his office. Trashcans have been upended, their

"I messed up a lot when I was young, and my family never gave up on me. That's the kind of teacher I want to be."

– DECA teacher Elton Griffith

contents spread over every surface and filling the small room with a sickly stench. The remnants of a large fried chicken dinner have been dumped onto his desk – bones and scraps littering the desktop, smears of grease staining his papers.

Once the initial revulsion passes, Griffith shakes his head in dismay. The vandalism is a personal attack with bluntly racist overtones, an isolated act by an unbalanced individual. At the same time, he believes it grew out of a more widespread and complex set of issues.

“We were not wanted,” he says later. “Our kids were pretty much ostracized wherever they went.”

The marriage between UD and Dayton Public Schools (DPS) had been rocky since DECA classes began in August. Bringing 14- and 15-year-olds onto a college campus was bound to involve culture shock on both sides. Factor in the stark contrast in demographics between mostly minority kids from lower-income households and the predominantly white students and staff of a fairly exclusive private university, and it was easy to predict a tough adjustment period.

Even the DECA teachers, black and white alike, have been viewed as outsiders and often feel unwelcome.

Griffith and his students have experienced this friction on numerous occasions. Griffith is closely monitored within the library and regularly warned to keep his students quiet. His kids often get nervous glances or tight-lipped smiles when someone has to share an elevator with them. If anything goes missing in the library, DECA students are immediately suspected.

One incident in particular exemplifies the collision of cultures to Griffith. “One day some DECA kids of mine were in front of the library,” he says, “and a bunch of (fraternity) pledges ran by. The kids had never seen guys running around in thongs and togas, and they started running around laughing.”

What struck Griffith as a natural reaction triggered an outraged response



Student Ryan Richardson works on an assignment during a supervised study session. Most students find DECA's rigorous curriculum demanding.

from a library official, who sent him an email message full of inflammatory language. Griffith refused to respond in kind. Instead, he simply shared the message with the DECA staff and urged students yet again to be on their best behavior. Rather than fighting every battle of this kind, he tries to understand the underlying issues and focus on the bigger picture: how to make this ambitious educational experiment work.

Now he has to find a way to understand why someone has vandalized his office. He sighs and reaches for his phone to call his principal, working in an office across campus, and let him know about this latest challenge.

Despite everything, DECA has to continue, Griffith believes. Students deserve this opportunity to live up to their potential, to receive an education worthy of their abilities. Attacks like this will do nothing to sway his determination.

But the day no longer feels quite so full of promise.

2003: An Unlikely Vision Takes Shape

DECA was born in a basement.

Many critical elements went into the school's creation: A promise by DPS officials, in exchange for support by business and community leaders of a critical levy, to open a new, exceptional high school within one year. The decision by KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the state's largest education philanthropy, to use a recent grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create early college high schools across Ohio. The desire of Dr. Tom Lasley, Dean of the UD School of Education, to get the university more involved with the community and offer urban students better options.

But the true heart of the school is its staff, and the first time several of the founding faculty members met to discuss their unlikely vision for the future of education was in the dingy basement of a downtown apartment building on a bitterly cold night in February 2003.



Teacher Becky Aicher talks with Maxx Schmidt about his plans for college following graduation in 2008. DECA students meet with their advisors daily in small groups or individually, which allows for close relationships and personal guidance on academics.

Tim Nealon, a former DPS teacher and administrator, had agreed to come out of retirement and leave behind his lake house in Tennessee to help Lasley start the school. Lasley identified a number of people interested in teaching at the school, and Nealon invited four of them, including Elton Griffith, to his temporary residence for an informal meeting to exchange ideas.

At the other end of the spectrum from Griffith, who was still in graduate school, was Becky Aicher, the most experienced educator at the meeting. After two decades of teaching language arts, she still loved her profession, and the challenges of working at a large public high school in an urban district didn't bother her. In fact, Aicher thrived in this demanding environment. She had embraced the opportunity to participate in a technical prep program that let her collaborate with other faculty members to provide project-based learning experiences for a small group of students. The results she saw made the extra effort worthwhile, and the innovation made teaching new and exciting again.

"We were seen as a radical group," she says of her team, "and a lot of the other teachers didn't like us because we weren't staying in our classrooms doing the classroom thing. We were shaking the place up a little bit."

When the program died, a victim of budget considerations and a stronger focus on test prep, Aicher did what she could to keep aspects of it alive in her classroom. But it just wasn't the same.

"I had a long way to go (until retirement)," Aicher says, "and I wanted something that inspired me.... I'd had a taste of what could be done with collaboration, so I wasn't real happy (to lose it)."

When the chance arose to join Griffith and Nealon, she was on board immediately.

"How could I pass this up?" she asks. "The opportunity to start a school from scratch? I figured if it didn't kill me, I could do it until I retired."

Joking aside, she knew, possibly better than anyone else, how difficult it would be to bring DECA to life.

"When we all met, we met with vision," Aicher says. "We wanted a new opportunity for urban kids.... It's very easy to get inspired by that kind of talk, but there were no real fundamentals of how we were going to do this. We didn't know."

The conversation was so compelling, the ideas so absorbing, that the group spent nearly six months focused on its vision for the school. They didn't start making concrete plans until late summer.

"It was about July when we decided, 'We'd better know what we're going to do when those doors open up in August,' and we started talking about project-based, problem-based learning," Aicher says.

Rather than traditional classes, teachers would create real-world learning experiences covering a variety of subjects. They would meet with all students and their families to create personalized learning plans based on each child's interests, aptitudes, needs and skills. Instead of grades and course credits, students' transcripts would include narrative descriptions of their progress and evaluations of dozens of state-defined skill

and knowledge benchmarks. Students would have to do extensive community service, complete job shadows and research colleges and careers. All, of course, while taking college courses whenever possible.

Year One: Vision Meets Reality

Once the team focuses, the details take shape remarkably quickly. But on the first day of school in August 2003, Griffith, Aicher and their fellow teachers confront the staggering reality of implementing what they've envisioned.

In the first quarter, Aicher tries to cover the core academic subjects through gardening, quilting and journal writing. "The kids loved it," she recalls. "It was stuff they'd never done before, a lot of one-on-one attention, and they had a lot of freedom all over campus."

The task proves overwhelming. "I've never been so tired in all my life. I was living day by day. I would go home and spend two to three hours at night trying to prep what I was going to cover the next day, and it was horrible."

By the time Elton Griffith discovers his office vandalized in mid-October, one faculty member has already buckled under the workload and chosen to leave the school. Her fellow teachers regret her departure, but no one really blames her.

"We worked 70- to 80-hour weeks," Griffith says. "I would get to work some days at 8:00, and I wouldn't get home until 7:00 or 8:00. We had staff meetings literally every night."

Even more worrisome is the question of whether students are learning all they need to. Aicher says that while students are happy, they don't realize the approach leaves "huge gaps" in their knowledge.

Griffith shares Aicher's frustrations with the individualized learning approach, and students' profound skill and knowledge gaps make his job even more difficult.

"I've never been so tired in all my life. I was living day by day"

– Teacher Becky Aicher

"We had only a handful of kids who were even remotely on level," Tim Nealon recalls. "Some were nonreaders."

"How can problem-based learning work," Griffith asks, "if kids can't spell the word 'problem?'"

"I wanted to teach," he says, "and I wasn't even teaching content. I was teaching kids how to sit down, how to be quiet, how to take notes – how to do things they should have learned four years ago."

As part of DECA's personalized approach, teachers also act as advisors. They work to forge close relationships with their students, stay in regular contact with parents and help students navigate the challenges of high school, college and their lives outside of school.

"The core issue was that we had to find a way to change the relationship of teacher to student," Nealon says. "There got to be a blurred line between what was your family life and what was your school life."

"The staff that would go into such an intense situation as DECA," he continues, "we would never push them to think in terms of a lifetime commitment to this project. We always posed it as, 'Give us

your best five years. Your very best five years you to have to offer."

Winter 2004: A Rift Opens

By January 2004, Elton Griffith, Becky Aicher and other DECA teachers feel like the bone-weary survivors of a prolonged battle. The time off over winter break is a blessed relief, but for many the lack of classes doesn't mean an end to the hard work. Aicher spends most of the two-week break with Nealon crafting a plan to provide more structure and ease the daily burden on the staff: student gateways.

With gateways, students will have to pass a series of six comprehensive reviews to demonstrate achievement in core subject areas and growing mastery of behaviors such as attendance, time management, journaling and community service. They will also take steps toward entering and succeeding in college. DECA still won't have grades, and students will complete gateways on their own schedules rather than being promoted as a group each spring, but the school will have a clear structure for evaluation and advancement.

In January, Sinclair Community



Instead of yearly promotions based on letter grades, DECA students have four to five years to pass a series of six gateways. Gateways are comprehensive reviews of academic performance, progress toward college, community service, and study and life skills.

"You never want to give up on a kid."

– Teacher Becky Aicher



Teachers Becky Aicher and Elton Griffith help James Woody with an assignment. DECA's small class sizes and emphasis on personal attention mean teachers often work closely with each other and their students.

College becomes a vital new partner. In many ways, Sinclair is better suited to DECA students' needs, with a strong emphasis on basic academics, a wide variety of remedial and refresher courses, numerous associate's degree programs and a reputation for preparing graduates well for further study at four-year institutions.

Even with the addition of gateways and new options for college courses, Aicher and the others realize DECA's structure is not sustainable.

"It could not be managed and managed well," Aicher says. "There were kids falling through the cracks. We had a hundred kids and six staff people, and there was no way we could ask for the rigor."

Searching for a compromise, teachers decide to try interdisciplinary units, an approach Aicher suggests. Working in groups of four, they will teach a shared topic or theme, each covering the aspects related to their subject area.

That was the first time we felt like we were making progress," Aicher says.

The struggle to remain open and experimental yet find a manageable structure deepens a rift among the teaching staff. The younger teachers pull away from traditional methods, while those with more experience try to adapt approaches that

have worked for them in the past.

While the working atmosphere remains respectful, the split puts Aicher in an uncomfortable position.

"At the school I came from," Aicher says, "I was seen as the radical. I was seen as the one stirring the pot."

"Then to come here and to be seen as almost a senior citizen and this stick-in-the-mud traditionalist, it threw me for a loop."

The success of the additional structure doesn't help the division. "I hated it for them," Aicher recalls. "They were good people, and they had wonderful ideas, but if you're going to do one kid at a time, you can only do so many kids, and we were at a loss."



Teachers also must work hard to manage students' behavior given the unprecedented freedom of having no fixed location or schedule. Students are sneaking away to smoke. Some are using or selling drugs on campus during school hours. Two students sneak away to have sex in secluded spots around campus. Four students shoplift candy and snacks from the university bookstore while another acts as their lookout.

If there is a positive aspect to these incidents, it is that many are discovered precisely because DECA is working so well for most students. With small class sizes and remarkably close relationships, teachers are quickly aware of rumors and can usually convince students to share information. For their part, students don't appreciate misbehavior that could jeopardize everyone's opportunities.

DECA also handles discipline problems differently. Staff members refuse

to turn a blind eye to difficult problems, but they also avoid rigid punishments. In many cases, a call or conference with a parent can resolve a problem. Along with detention or suspension, students sometimes have to discuss and apologize for their actions at schoolwide community meetings. Some sign behavior contracts in order to continue at the school.

In essence, DECA's staff wants to keep as many students as possible. The alternative, for many, is bleak.

"You never want to give up on a kid," Aicher says, "because we know what his future is if we give up on him: He's going to end up in prison or dead. It's tragic, it really is. When you give up, you feel like you're sentencing that kid."

"We know what waits out there. It's almost like that monster looming outside the door to grab our kids... That's probably the hardest part of this job, deciding when to draw that line."

Spring 2004: A Teaching Career in Jeopardy

Elton Griffith considers the shift to gateways and interdisciplinary units a key turning point, and he clings to a battered but deep belief in the importance of his work, his potential to make a difference. Having left a career in social work to become a teacher, he is uniquely familiar with the demands of helping troubled teens confront tremendous challenges.

"When you work with kids in the legal system on probation," he says, "the major thing that's missing for them is an education and teachers who cared."

"I messed up a lot when I was younger, and my family never gave up on me. That's the kind of teacher I want to be."

Even so, the constant stress and sacrifices of the job affect all aspects of his life, and at times he struggles with doubts about his decision to go into education.

"My wife threatened to divorce me twice the first year," he says. "I wasn't

getting any sleep. I had a newborn baby... It was really rough." He sometimes reconsiders his future, hoping he can stay in teaching long enough to pay off student loans for graduate school.

As the school year heads into the final quarter, Griffith still has his office in the library, which has become a more welcoming environment. It was reassuring that UD refused to tolerate his harassment in October and quickly terminated the person who had vandalized his office. The friction between DECA and its host seems to have decreased. Students are being more careful about their behavior on campus. In fact, many blend in so perfectly in their college courses that fellow students are shocked to learn they're not undergraduates.

Students are also doing well in DECA's interdisciplinary units, where Griffith's teaching skills are improving rapidly, especially with pointed guidance from Aicher. Forging close relationships with students and parents, many of whom are



Jasmine Green and Louise Barr came to the school from different backgrounds but both are motivated by the chance to earn college credit.

“There are SO many things – emotions, thoughts – you can trigger in a kid, and you won’t even know.”

– Teacher Elton Griffith

reluctant to invite outsiders into their personal lives, is a bit more challenging.

“Sometimes I’m an easy target because I’m not an American,” he says.

A native of the Caribbean island of Barbados, Griffith came to the U.S. at age 16. After graduating from college in

New Jersey, he intended to return to Barbados. Instead, he fell in love with a woman who shared his passion for rock climbing, snowboarding and a simple life enjoying the outdoors. En route to California to look for work, they stopped in her hometown, a Dayton suburb. When a

family illness prolonged their stay, she got a job teaching special needs students, while Griffith found a position as a social worker. He later decided to teach, hoping it would give him a better chance to help teenagers.

At DECA, some students look down on Griffith for his slight accent and unconventional views on race, culture and politics. Still worse, some parents share the students’ views.

“We had some ugly moments with parents,” Nealon says, “some out-of-control family situations.... Our model allowed them such access, they were in your face all the time.

“Everything we did was under a microscope at that point,” Nealon adds. Nevertheless, Griffith somehow “had the ability to go through it, not take it personally and keep working with everyone. He was there, body and soul, for those kids.”

The secret of Griffith’s commitment? Sheer determination.

“I’ve worked in very stressful environments,” Griffith says, “and you just deal with it.

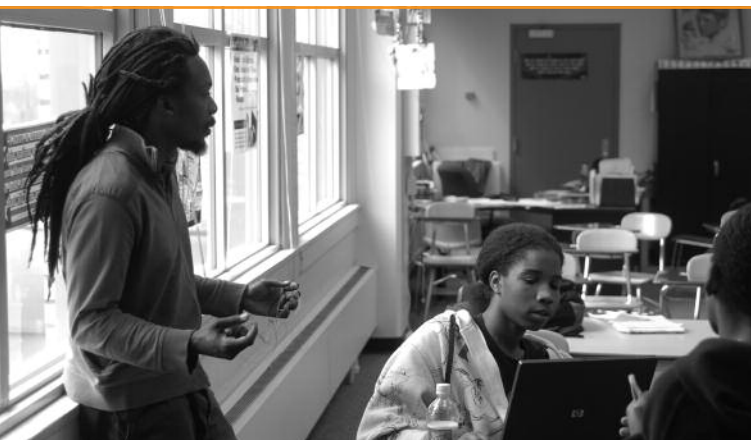
“Teachers can make a conscious decision every day to give kids a fresh start. I try to do that. I don’t hold grudges.... You can’t. For some of these kids, you’re a parent, teacher, pain in the ass. There are so many things – emotions, thoughts – you can trigger in a kid, and you won’t even know.”

Still, the daily struggles often leave Griffith too drained for anything else.

“I’d go home and basically bathe, have dinner and lie down,” he says. “That’s it.

“For me to be really successful at my job basically requires me to neglect my family.”

Given everything he’s been through, the final formality of a state-mandated evaluation to conclude his first year of teaching doesn’t worry Griffith. He’s had problems with the program, including several missed appointments with an assigned mentor. The mentor, also overworked, has trouble understanding Griffith’s constantly changing schedule and location. But Griffith has been so entrenched in the daily battles that he has little concern for bureaucracy.



Elton Griffith spends most lunch periods in his classroom, where students like Yhanteg Marzette can come to study or ask for extra help. DECA students often work in computer labs or check out laptops to work on assignments or exhibitions.



Tim Nealon, who came out of retirement to serve as the school's first principal, says the personalized approach meant that "we had to find a way to change the relationship of teacher to student."

This attitude and DECA's unorthodox approach do not serve Griffith well during the evaluation.

Right away, "the evaluator asked me where my desk was," Griffith recalls, "and I told him I didn't have one, that I didn't think teachers needed to sit."

This exchange sets the tone for the evaluation, which Griffith ultimately fails. He is placed on probation and will have to repeat the entry year teacher program and evaluation. If he fails again, he will need to go back to graduate school before he can continue teaching.

The students, staff and outside stakeholders have agreed that the DECA experiment will continue in the fall, but with so much hanging over him Griffith has serious doubts about whether he will be a part of it.

Year Two: Under the Spotlight

When DECA reopens in August 2004, the school has a permanent location for the first time. The university has expanded into an office building adjacent to campus, and the third floor is designated

for DECA. The school's new site – a vast expanse of gray carpet, concrete columns and cubicle walls – may seem bland and corporate, ill-suited to a visionary nontraditional high school, but students and staff are thrilled to have a home in which to begin building their traditions.

A number of the founding DECA faculty members, most from the less traditional group, chose to leave before the second year. Disappointingly, 18 of the 97 students also departed. Five were expelled for discipline issues, while 13 transferred to other schools. Deep attrition in the charter class is common among experimental startup schools, but this fact provides little consolation to staff members.

Fortunately, there are clear signs of progress as well. In their first two quarters at Sinclair, 31 students have taken college classes in math, English, reading and composition, and 18 earned a B or better. For young people who may never have considered college a serious option, succeeding in classes alongside students at least four years older provides a feeling of accomplishment – and a dizzying sense of possibility. By the winter

quarter of 2005, nearly 50 DECA students will be enrolled at Sinclair, and 36 will be taking multiple classes.

These early successes earn DECA attention outside the district and some respect within it. By spring, in the span of just two months, DECA will be featured in a three-page article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a cover story in the *Ohio School Boards Association Journal* and a special report commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to profile the nation's five most innovative high schools.

The school also is chosen for a multiyear study by the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. The media spotlight is exciting, but it can also be distracting.

Challenges certainly lie ahead, but with the issues of campus culture clashes, student accountability, college coursework and academic structure all showing signs of resolution, it is easy to be hopeful at the start of the new academic year. If nothing else, the addition of several new faculty members and roughly 100 incoming ninth graders changes the dynamic at DECA.



Students Cory Williams and Jonathan Fauver make time for fun during a free moment in the media lab. For all the intense academics, DECA staff works to foster a welcoming environment where students feel accepted and comfortable.

Building on the success of the interdisciplinary units, teachers will now work together in “pods” of four to cover core subject areas, collaborating closely and maintaining some elements of personalized learning. Becky Aicher’s pod includes math teacher Katie King and science teacher Al Gomez, both new to the school, and a DECA veteran she is eager to continue working with. Despite his lingering uncertainty, Elton Griffith has returned.

“If not for Becky,” he says, “I probably would have left DECA after my first year. She was my mentor.”

Fall : Structure and Strife

Being in a structured environment also helps the year get off to a better start, Griffith says later. “I was teaching actual classes. Things that grad school prepared me for.”

Even so, being an advisor continues to present challenges. Few students still hassle Griffith about his accent or viewpoints, but many struggle with the idea of any teacher playing a part in their personal lives.

The issue comes to a painful head one day when Griffith has a guest speaker address his class. At one point, he notices a second-year student, Chelsea Pope,

absorbed in combing her hair. Chelsea, a self-described “glam girl” who habitually touches up her hair and makeup throughout the day, was in his advisory the previous year. They have a close relationship, and Griffith decides to point out her disrespectful behavior.

Chelsea thinks Griffith is being unfair, because she has frequently combed her hair in his class without any comment from him. She challenges him loudly. “Griff, where is the sign that says I can’t comb my hair?”

He pulls her aside. The discussion gets heated, and Griffith eventually gives her a detention.

After school, still stung by the public reprimand, Chelsea complains to her mother, downplaying her own role in the confrontation.

Iris Pope, a former UD employee and one of the more actively involved DECA parents, calls Tim Nealon to criticize Griffith. The comb incident is just the latest and most glaring example of a deeper problem, she insists. Griffith is immature and inexperienced. He plays favorites in class. He spends too much time trying to be friends with his students, and yet he neglects Chelsea, because he thinks she needs less support than her classmates.

For his part, Griffith thinks Chelsea acts up because he is demanding better work if she wants to participate in an upcoming school trip. He feels Chelsea consistently pushes boundaries, and he believes she tries to avoid consequences by hiding her actions from her mother, who is physically disabled and in poor health.

In a more traditional school, the process for dealing with such a tense situation might take weeks. Instead, Nealon decides to confront the matter head-on. He takes Griffith for a home visit with Chelsea and her mother.

Nealon and Griffith understand that Chelsea’s issues are more complicated than acting up in class. A few years ago, Iris Pope became paralyzed from the waist down during surgery.

“I walked into a hospital age 39, and three months later, I didn’t walk out,” Pope explains. It was nearly impossible to cope with “the devastation of going under anesthesia and going into surgery for six hours, but I didn’t come out for three days. And then I couldn’t walk.”

“I had my dark days,” she recalls. “My faith more than anything brought me through.”

Her two older children adapted reasonably well to their mother’s tragic circumstances, but Chelsea, at age 12, had a more difficult time. She was embarrassed to push her mother’s wheelchair around the neighborhood where her friends might see them. She was bitter and furious at the surgeon who had instantly, permanently disrupted all their lives. She was intensely proud of her mother for fighting so hard to regain her strength, for still trying to help others.

Griffith and Nealon sympathize with Pope’s story and have worked hard to help Chelsea live up to her mother’s expectations and her own potential, to make the most of her opportunities at DECA.

“When we started off, (Chelsea) was my mini-me,” Griffith says. “Everywhere I went, she was there. And when it got to the stage where I wanted to address certain behaviors, she didn’t want to hear me.”

Pope admits that Chelsea has had “an issue with not thinking before she spoke. I had to work with her her whole life on other ways to say things. I told her you have to respect other adults, not just your mother.”

By the end of a sometimes tense conversation in her home, Pope and Griffith certainly don't agree on everything, but, she says, “He heard me, and I heard him, too.”

Nealon praises Griffith for his handling of such confrontations, saying he “could respond to a situation and do the right things for the right reasons, and not just react to the symptoms. That is an unusual characteristic for a person.”

Griffith has survived yet another harrowing experience, ready to return to the classroom. But given the uniquely intense student-teacher-parent relationships DECA demands, how long can he expect to postpone the next crisis?

Winter 2005: Changing of the Guard

For Becky Aicher, team teaching in pods works out wonderfully. In addition to deepening her regard for Griffith, the experience leads her to respect and appreciate King and Gomez.

“We just all really clicked,” she says “We worked very well together.”

While her colleagues make the DECA schedule easier to bear, Aicher prepares for one of DECA's biggest changes to date: Tim Nealon's departure.

Nealon always planned to leave DECA within two years. His role was to create the school and shepherd it through its formative stages, then step aside. His dedication to DECA and

his belief in its principles and potential never wavered. He simply didn't want to leave retirement for a long-term commitment.

In the fall of 2004, Nealon and others begin work to identify his successor. Their search doesn't lead far from DECA, but it does end in a surprising place: Oakwood. The affluent suburb, which borders Dayton just blocks from DECA, is home to one of the state's best-funded and highest-performing school districts. For nearly seven years, it has been led by Superintendent Dr. Judy Hennessey.

Hennessey surprises nearly everyone with her decision to leave the top position in one of the most successful districts in Ohio to assume responsibility for a chaotic educational experiment already well under way.

“If not for Becky, I probably would have left DECA after my first year. She was my mentor.”

– Teacher Elton Griffith



Becky Aicher helps students Thomas Scroggins and William McCullom. As part of a focused effort to instill study skills, bridge knowledge gaps and prepare students for the demands of later DECA work, the school created a First Year Academy with small, single-sex classes and a group of four dedicated teachers.



Dr. Judy Hennessey left a position as superintendent in a top district to become DECA's principal midway through the school's second year.

"People have pinned a lot of hopes on us... We don't have a window to fail."

– Principal Judy Hennessey

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In January 2005, Judy Hennessey becomes DECA's second principal.

In taking the reins from Nealon, Hennessey must step into the shoes of a dynamic, charismatic visionary who has inspired his staff to achieve what many considered impossible. But she also believes she faces an even more difficult challenge – repairing serious flaws in how the school operates.

"I can't describe to you my first few weeks here," Hennessey says later, "watching kids wander the school all day long. I just sat here in disbelief."

"You have kids who aren't even ready for high school work," she says, "and you're claiming to compress high school, get them some college credit, have them take the OGT and pass it, and have them get a creditable SAT score, through what (they're) interested in? To me it seems bizarre, and it flies in the face of what little I know about kids and poverty."

Hennessey is convinced DECA needs to establish more academic rigor to complement its strong emphasis on relevance and relationships. To do otherwise would be a grave disservice to

the students and their families.

"To be allowed these precious children," Hennessey says. "This is their only high school. I feel incredibly responsible."

Even for a faculty accustomed to change, the transition to Hennessey's administration promises to be rough. In addition to differences in style and personality, Hennessey is determined to build on Nealon's achievements while guiding the school in a new direction. Something as simple as establishing and enforcing consistent rules for student behavior, for example, becomes an immediate friction point for teachers who preferred the more open early days.

"I feel like I'm in the position of being the bad guy all the time," Hennessey says. "The same things I've been able to do elsewhere, I can't engender that here because I'm constantly in role of saying, 'Don't let kids wander the hallways.'"

She is excited about DECA's potential and has a clear vision for the school, but as the veteran faculty members can attest, these are only a starting point. Getting others to share that vision and work to realize it can be much more challenging.

Year Three: Turning the Corner

The school year 2005-06 – his third year as a teacher and DECA's third as a school – marks a definite turning point for Elton Griffith.

Until then, he says, "I was learning how to be a teacher, learning how to be an advisor. I was very uncertain."

In year three, "It's still difficult, but I

know what I need to do. My students understand me, and I try to understand them."

Having passed the state's evaluation for new teachers, Griffith is glad to have official recognition to match his increasing confidence in the classroom. He is also comfortable with Judy Hennessey's plans for the school.

Tim Nealon "created something from nothing and got a bunch of unique, creative people together who had a common passion and vision.... To pull off what he pulled off and to get our name out there and have families come and commit to us when they had better alternatives" was a tremendous achievement, Griffith says.

But he supports Hennessey's efforts to push DECA toward a more measurable, sustainable model.

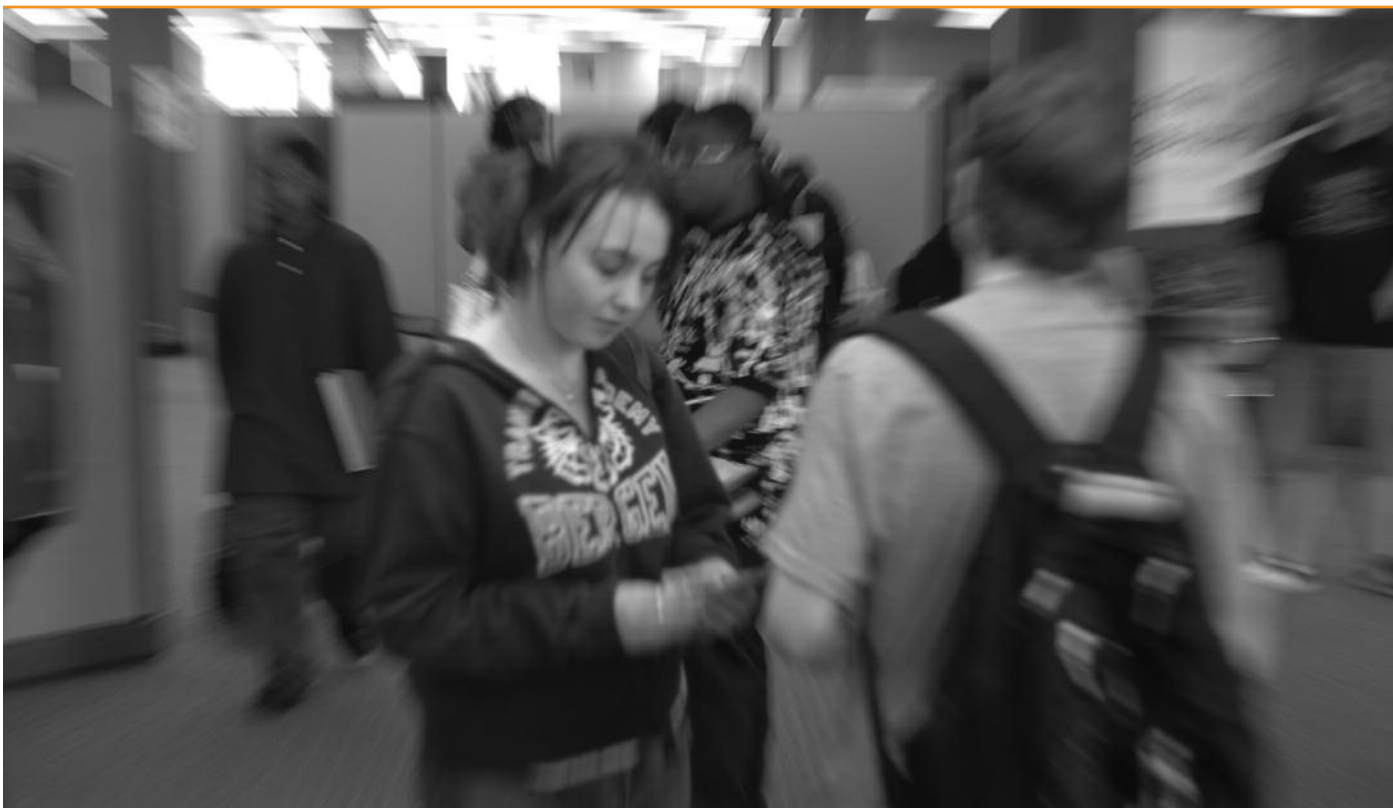
"If we were all consistent across the board, this school could be awesome," he says. "If we had more structure. Everyone knows what the theoretical vision is, but everyone interprets it differently."

Those differences in interpretation have contributed to still more turnover among DECA's staff and students, chipping away at the founding group even as the school grows with each entering class.

"I think a lot of people are so-called 'disgruntled' with Judy," Griffith says, "because she's holding them accountable."

For himself, Griffith is certain that he doesn't have all the answers. "I'm always modifying the way I do things, modifying my perspective," he says.

"There's so much, so much that we



Second-year student Leslie Rittenhouse talks with a friend between classes. DECA students must balance an intense high school curriculum, college classes and requirements such as community service and job shadows.

(still) need to figure out,” he confesses. “Early college would work better if it started in fourth grade.”



Year three also brings an important milestone for Becky Aicher: Her son Jack has enrolled at DECA. Aicher has seen the school’s shortcomings up close, yet she considers DECA the best place for her own child.

“Jack is not a Catholic school kid,” she says. “He is a different kind of kid. I knew traditional schools would never, ever serve him.”

Her decision is a vote of confidence in the teachers. She says, “I looked at the staff, and I thought, ‘This is the group that I want my son to have. Even if the school is different (in a few years).’ The people I knew would inspire him and serve him well.”

Winter 2006: Refusing to Expect Too Little

By the end of her third semester at DECA, Judy Hennessey still struggles to win the trust and support of many who insist on comparing her unfavorably with Tim Nealon. But her commitment to the school and its students enables her to persevere. DECA students deserve, and can realistically attain, far more than they realize, she believes.

“I say to kids a lot, ‘We’re making a whole lot of mistakes at DECA. You know it’s not together yet. But one mistake we refuse to make is to expect too little of you.’”

Even couched in those terms, the high standards don’t sit well with some students. In overcrowded public schools in struggling urban districts, it’s common for students to pass with good marks merely by showing up, turning in some kind of work and not getting into trouble.

Every year, many of those students

arrive at DECA only to discover they are well below grade level in key areas.

Bridging students’ skill gaps is a major challenge, but Hennessey hopes a new program the school is launching in the fall will help to address it. The first-year academy (FYA) will establish an intensive, dedicated program for entering ninth graders. Students will work with four dedicated teachers for all of their classes and focus entirely on core academics, test preparation and essential skills for success at DECA and in college. In addition, they will be separated by gender and will move from class to class as a group.

The FYA is a bold experiment, but Hennessey knows DECA must move quickly to bring students along.

“People have pinned a lot of hopes on us,” she says, “but with that is the implicit understanding that if we don’t have a huge percentage of these kids attending college when they graduate, that [support] will evaporate. . . . We don’t have a window to fail.”



Stephanie Smith steadies the microscope while Diana Colonia peers at a specimen. The lab experience will help prepare them for the Ohio Graduation Test and more advanced classes, such as the college prep chemistry elective.

Year Four: Easing Transitions for Students

It is close to noon on a Wednesday in mid-September 2006 when Becky Aicher experiences something rare: a free moment. Her classroom, usually full of students, is strangely empty. She's just finished a class and will head to a planning meeting soon, but for now, her time is unscheduled.

The first-year academy, she says, "is a lot of work, but I think it's going to pay off... We're running study sessions trying to teach (students) how to study. We're pounding in that work ethic idea, organization.... They're getting the idea of what DECA's all about pretty quickly, unlike some of our past years."

The single-sex classes, while generally unpopular with the students, are clearly

better for their teachers.

"There's a lot less clowning from the boys," Aicher says. "The girls are willing to ask questions and speak out, which a lot of times I think the boys were stifling."

Students spend most of their day with Aicher, Griffith, Katie King and science teacher Tracy Martz, but more than a month into the school year, Aicher estimates that only some 25 percent of her students are genuinely on track.

"The honeymoon is over," she says, "and kids are realizing how much work there is to do."

They shouldn't be surprised by the workload. Early in the summer, students who hoped to attend DECA in the fall were required to report for an orientation consisting of three full days of classes. The process proved more effective than the

interviews and essays used in the past to evaluate prospective students, Aicher says, but many students – and their families – still didn't realize the extent of their commitment.

Their teachers, on the other hand, expected a heavy workload. The FYA schedule leaves no room for regular planning periods, so teachers' frequent meetings must take place during lunch. For now the goal is simply to keep up, as there's little chance of getting ahead. While the work is intense, it's a comfort to Aicher to know that her situation is temporary.

"I came in here with six years left in my career," she says. Now, "I have two more years in the classroom, and (then) I'll move on. I'll do something in education, but I won't be in the classroom. I've done my deal."

While she still loves being at DECA, Aicher senses she's a bit more rigid with students, a touch less enthusiastic about the endless work. Students and colleagues don't seem to detect any difference, but Aicher has always been her own toughest critic. Above all, she doesn't want to lose her passion for teaching.

"I've been in traditional high schools long enough to see those people we called ROADies: Retired On Active Duty," she says.

"I always vowed to myself that if I ever felt myself heading in that direction, that I'd get out. Because it has to be about the kids, and when it quits being about the kids ... you're in the wrong place."

Lost in reflection, Aicher looks up to see someone enter her classroom. One of her FYA students, Jaslyn is a tall, athletic girl with a wide smile and a penchant for socializing. She's trying hard in her classes

"When it quits being about the kids ... you're in the wrong place."

– Teacher Becky Aicher



Becky Aicher, William McCullom and Chayce Jefferson react to comments from a fellow member of the First Year Academy. The close relationships among DECA students and staff allow for good-natured teasing alongside pointed encouragement.

but struggles with the workload. Her difficulties are especially troubling given her easy success in middle school, where she rarely had to strain to earn good grades.

As she walks by with an armful of books and binders, Aicher asks, “How was class this morning?”

“So good, so far,” Jaslyn replies, “but oh, this all-girls thing, Ms. Aicher!”

“Well,” Aicher says, managing to sound both amused and sympathetic, “missing those boys, are you?”

Jaslyn sighs and rolls her eyes heavenward, then says emphatically, “Yes!”

“Well, go to lunch and look at boys,” Aicher advises, “and let me know how that is.”

Her books deposited on her desk, Jaslyn hurries off to follow her teacher’s advice.

“Bye, Ms. Aicher,” she says brightly.

“Bye, sweetie.”

Aicher chuckles. For now, at least, she’s definitely in the right place.



In many ways, launching the FYA recalls the process of creating DECA four years earlier, but in one key respect things are vastly better. Teachers now have somewhere new to turn for help: colleagues who aren’t equally overwhelmed.

The DECA faculty quickly recognizes the struggles of the FYA teachers and rallies around them. Teachers with extra planning time begin offering special FYA classes once a week. This exposes the new students to more teachers and subjects, while easing the burden on their primary teachers. The new schedule also means FYA students can be split into four groups rather than three, which will reduce class sizes for everyone.

The changes make an immediate difference. While the FYA teachers still race to keep up day by day, they’re also able to prepare for what lies ahead.



First-year students Marwa Berri and Kawther Issa work on laptops in language arts class. DECA teachers frequently incorporate technology in lessons to prepare students for the work they can expect as a college student or working professional.

Winter 2007: A Future Under Threat

When the second semester arrives, many students are seemingly no closer to the year-end goal of passing a gateway than they were in August. A few, though, are exceeding expectations. In March, one student, Marissa Meredith, passes her second gateway, a milestone that many past DECA students failed to reach within two years.

This tangible sign of success is heartening in a time of acute anxiety about DECA's future. In January, DPS announced an unexpected budget shortfall of \$30 million. If an emergency operating levy is rejected by voters in May, the district will face school closings, serious programming reductions and staff cuts as high as 30 percent – including 300 teachers. With cuts based on seniority as required by their contracts, most of

DECA's staff will be vulnerable.

Even if DECA survives, the key components that make the school work – small class sizes, effective advisories, college coursework, staff committed to this demanding and innovative model – could disappear.

DECA teachers do what they can to drum up support, including going door to door. Many students join the effort, reaching out to their neighbors and canvassing the city. Everyone holds out hope, but the odds are long. The levy is large, and many residents, struggling in a weak economy, feel they can't afford a substantial tax increase, no matter how worthy the cause.

On election night, the news is not good. The levy fails, 58 percent to 42 percent. At DECA the following day, emotions run high as students and teachers contemplate the possibility of

losing everything they have worked four years to build.

Hennessey tries to reassure the students and faculty, telling them DECA has achieved too much and gained too many powerful supporters to go down without a fight.

Spring 2007: The First Graduates

In the midst of uncertainty about its future, DECA also has much to celebrate: After four long years, the school will graduate its charter class.

Of the 97 students who enrolled in August 2003, only 37 remain. The first group of students was buffeted by the continuous changes of DECA's early evolution, contributing to high attrition. As the school grows more stable and students enter with clearer expectations, fewer students choose to leave.

In addition, five of the 37 charter class members will remain for a fifth year. Because DECA combines college and high school work, it allows students to attend an additional year to complete all six required gateways or earn additional college credit.

Despite the low number, DECA earns intense media attention for that fact that every one of its 32 graduates has been accepted – and is going – to college. The day before commencement, the school welcomes a reporter and photographer working on a story for the *New York Times*.

The budget crisis takes a backseat to the tale of triumph. If the fact of an urban public school with a 100 percent college acceptance rate weren't enough, seven of DECA's students have earned enough college credit to receive associate's degrees in addition to their high school diplomas. Almost all of the students have won scholarships, and many have earned full rides. In total, they have received well over \$2 million in scholarships and grants, an average of more than \$62,000 per student.

The students are quick to credit DECA with making possible what will be, for

many, a life-changing opportunity to attend college. In particular, many point to the tireless efforts of their teachers and close relationships with their advisors.

"I think of my advisor, Mr. Griff, as my dad, because I don't have a father figure in my family," graduating student An'Gelica says. "I don't think I would get that at a regular high school."

Neither of An'Gelica's two older brothers finished high school, although one earned a GED. An'Gelica faced an uphill climb with her own education because she suffers from a chronic health condition. In her first two years, she missed several weeks of school. Even while hospitalized, she knew she could count on the support of her DECA family.

In a traditional school, she says, "What teacher would take you to your doctor appointment, or come pick you up at your house if you miss school, or come to the hospital and see you every day?"

Elton Griffith did all of these things and more to help An'Gelica keep her spirits up and stay on track. The extra effort paid off – An'Gelica earned a scholarship to attend The Ohio State University, where she plans to study psychology.

Another student in Griffith's advisory, Saffa, might be college-bound even at another school. Her brothers all graduated from high school and went on to college, and her parents expect the same of her. DECA did prepare her better for the challenges of college, she believes, and more importantly Saffa felt safe, welcome and free to excel there.

Saffa was born in southern Iraq during the first Gulf War. She spent the first 18 months of her life in a series of bomb shelters and refugee camps as her family tried to secure safe passage out of the region. When permission to relocate to the U.S. finally came, Saffa's father chose Dayton as the more diverse community of two options offered by their aid agency. Even so, Saffa has known her share of prejudice and expected no different in high school, especially after the terrorist attacks of 2001.

Instead, she found everyone at DECA surprisingly understanding and supportive.

"It was shocking how they could be so open to me," Saffa says. "After 9-11, people (elsewhere) looked at me differently, but they accept me here."

Saffa has been in Griffith's advisory for

"When you see the hope we create for some of these kids, that's what keeps me going."

– Teacher Elton Griffith



four years, and he has forged a close relationship with her father, in part because both were born and raised abroad.

“I’m really going to miss DECA,” Saffa says, “DECA has been a life-changing experience for me. It helped me learn life skills, exposed me to diversity, helped me learn to adapt.”

Mike, one of Becky Aicher’s students, risked being expelled several times. His self-destructive behavior stemmed from the pressure of trying to care for two younger siblings while both parents were essentially absent due to serious drug addictions. Aicher and Tim Nealon both got involved in the custody hearing that allowed the children to live with more stable relatives.

Mike’s issues at school included lying, cheating on a test in Griffith’s class and plagiarizing a paper for Aicher’s class. Through it all, Aicher believed he was just lashing out, looking for an excuse to give up on himself. She refused to either write him off or indulge his misbehavior, each time holding him accountable with strict punishments, but giving him an opportunity – along with pointed

encouragement – to get back on track.

“I did my best to take care of everyone else,” Mike wrote in his senior autobiography, a requirement to pass gateway six, “and I didn’t spend enough time on me. My brother and sister were far more important at the time.”

With support from Aicher and other teachers, and a lot of determination, Mike has completed his DECA requirements and earned numerous college credits. He plans to begin an associate’s program in law enforcement en route to a master’s degree in criminal justice and forensic science.

Mike considers Aicher one of “the biggest blessings I have received,” along with his aunt and uncle.

“I am now graduating from high school,” he wrote, “first in my immediate family, and I am going to college. All of this has happened with your support.... I can’t thank you enough, and I have no idea how I could ever repay you except to be successful in all of my work, and throughout life.”

During commencement, Judy Hennessey suggests one powerful way Mike,

Saffa, An’Gelica, and all the DECA graduates have already repaid everything invested in them over the past four years. By participating in this flawed but magnificent experiment, she says, “You taught us all a new way of going to high school.”

Year Five: Weathering Change

After an emotional spring and a busy summer, DECA welcomes its fifth incoming class in August 2007. The school has survived by reinventing itself once again.

When it became clear that DECA could not survive the district budget cuts without serious damage to its structure, DPS agreed to terminate its contract with UD, freeing DECA to reopen as a charter school. Eager to maintain ties with its success story, DPS then sponsored the school, allowing the district to provide a handful of services and maintain a formal relationship with DECA, while giving Judy Hennessey and the faculty additional freedom to pursue their unique educational vision.

Over the summer, the DECA leadership worked furiously to establish the legal foundation for this status change. Budgets, contracts, schedules and many other critical minutiae had to be worked out in less than two months. In addition, the school needed to hire several new teachers to replace faculty members who left in anticipation of fallout from the district or to pursue other opportunities.

Despite a draining race to the finish line, the first day of school goes well. The most noticeable change is a new public address system with electronic bells to announce class changes. Originally outlawed by the DECA founders as a symbol of close-minded traditional education, the bells make it easier for students and teachers to keep consistent class schedules.



Jamal Brunson and Brandon Glasper work on owl pellet dissection in Kanika Jones’ science class.

Although so much has changed behind the scenes, in terms of the experience for students and staff, Becky Aicher considers this DECA's smoothest opening day yet. For her personally, the year seems especially promising. Jamie Bentley, the second-year language arts teacher, has already said the students who completed FYA last year are far better prepared. In fact, she's had to revise all of her lesson plans because the FYA students are able to do more in less time.

Never content to rest on its success, the DECA team begins exploring a plan to add a class of seventh graders. The addition would mean hiring new faculty members and looking into more creative use of existing space, but most consider this the next logical step in preparing students for success in college.

Despite plans to leave after this year, Aicher has reconsidered and expects to be back in the fall. In fact, the prospect of still more changes at the school actually appeals to her.

"I think it's the atmosphere of change that I like," she says. "It's the openness to 'Well, if that doesn't work, let's try this.' ... It's the secret of our success – that and our staff.

The spirit that the staff carries around the school is inspirational, she says. "They're pretty much willing to do whatever it takes to make it work for a kid, and that's not a spirit you feel in a lot of other school buildings."

That kind of commitment is a necessity at DECA.

"We do have a lot of kids," Aicher says, "who walk in the door and don't even have the basic means that most people need to get by: Somebody to care



Principal Judy Hennessey catches up with student Traci Blaylock between classes. Even as it continues to expand, DECA maintains a low student-teacher ratio and overall student population to encourage a close-knit community founded on shared goals and mutual support.

about them, somebody to show interest in them, a safe place to go home to, food."

Reaching young people in those circumstances "requires so much more than preparation and teaching," she says. "It requires so much of your own being."

Spring 2008: More Graduates, Unfinished Business

In late spring, Elton Griffith is preparing to wrap up the school year. He, too, will return for a sixth year. Having helped design DECA's program for incoming seventh graders, he is leaning toward leaving the FYA to teach history to the school's youngest students.

Like Aicher, he thrives on innovation.

"If there's not always something new, I can't be here," he says. "It's the evolutionary process, the adapting.... I truly think we

make decisions that are reflective of the students – what they need, what our society wants of them, from them... Dayton is a unique place because to be able to send 40 kids to college who are truly prepared will have a significant effect on the city."

He's come a long way since the confrontations that marked his first two years, and his doubts about teaching have disappeared.

"I love this job," he says, "because when you go through the process with kids, they might hate me at the end of the first year, and they might not talk to me for the second and third year, but by the fourth year, when they start taking college classes and they realize what I was trying to initiate or trying to get them to do, it registers, and that's what I really appreciate."

Chelsea Pope is a perfect example. While her relationship with Griffith never resumed its initial closeness, she looks back on their clashes with a different perspective. After graduating from DECA and enrolling at UD to study media and political science, she has a better appreciation for how Griffith helped her.

"Mr. Griffith and I had a love-hate relationship," she admits, "but when it comes to teaching, he is an excellent

"You taught us all a new way of going to high school."

– Judy Hennessey, at DECA's first commencement



Shakira Gary-Long shows she's mastered the material for a First Year Academy language arts class. DECA has created a culture in which academic success is celebrated and all students are encouraged to achieve their full potential.

teacher... In my history class I'm getting good grades, and I owe that to him.

"I love Griff," she says. "I've learned so much from him. He was one of my best teachers. He played a role in getting me where I am today."

While some DECA graduates are struggling in college, many are thriving, earning good grades and getting involved in their campus communities. And this year's graduates possess the potential for even greater success. With 48 graduates, including all five fifth-year students from the charter group, the DECA class of 2008 is larger by half than the group that earned diplomas in 2007. Again, every student will

be going to college in the fall, many with substantial scholarships.

Commencement is held in the spacious new basketball arena of a nearby suburban high school. The setting is the perfect symbol of traditional public education, a glimpse of what high school might have been for these students under other circumstances.

But no one seems wistful, or even unduly impressed. The second graduating class of Dayton Early College Academy represents a remarkable, nearly unprecedented achievement in modern education. And everyone present is thrilled to be a part of it.

Griffith, in particular, wouldn't trade the tumultuous early years for anything, because they led him to this point.

"This job has made me become a better person," he says. To be honest, he adds, "DECA saved my life. When you see the hope we create for some of these kids, that's what keeps me going."

If he really thinks about it, Griffith admits, "I've got everything I need, literally, right now. I can't believe I'm saying that. It sounds like I'm happy living here."

"My ultimate goal was to leave at the end of this year," he says, "but I'll be back next year.... There's still a lot of unfinished stuff that I'm curious about. When these seventh graders get to college, how are they going to do?"

Realizing how long it will take for students entering seventh grade in the fall to reach college, he laughs.

"That means I'll be here a while."

The DECA model is far from perfect, and the school's long-term outlook is certainly an open question. Beyond exploring ongoing innovations such as incorporating earlier grades and refining the curriculum, the school faces continuous challenges in the areas of sustainable funding, student attrition, and teacher burnout, among other issues.

Even so, at a moment like this, it's easy to believe in a clear path leading to a bright tomorrow. DECA and Griffith have both come a remarkably long way since the early days of culture shock and campus conflict.

And the future seems full of promise. ▀



About the storyteller

Phil Neal is a freelance writer and editor whose clients include several Fortune 50

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Every Student Deserves a Legacy

This series from KnowledgeWorks Foundation shares the day-to-day struggles and triumphs of educators and students working to transform underperforming large urban high schools into small personalized schools or to pioneer schools that blend high school and college learning. Previous books in the series are available at www.kwfdn.org. You can also follow a particular school or campus by going to “School Stories” on the website.

2004-05

A Year of Transformation in the Lives of Ohio's Urban High School Students

Teachers and students in three urban districts struggle with sometimes overwhelming challenges during the first year of innovative high school reform.

2005-06

Small Moments, Big Dreams

Real-life stories from five redesigned urban high schools in their second year show both progress and promise yet to be realized.

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Three early college high schools, each at a different stage of development, work to find the best structure to help teenagers attend high school and college at the same time.

2006-07

Most Likely to Succeed

In their third year, new small schools see change in both culture and practice – but unexpected hurdles slow progress for some.

To a Higher Degree

As teachers and administrators refine their schools, students in early college high schools defy expectations.

2007-08

From First Day to First Graduates

Educators at Brookhaven High School in Columbus fight to keep their dreams alive over four years of introducing small schools in a hard-hit urban district.

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In Cleveland Heights, principals and teachers adjust to expanded roles that give them a greater voice during the first four years of small schools.

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Five years in the life of Ohio's first early college high school bring changes in structure but not in mission.

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