LEARNING BY DEGREE

Real-life stories from three early college high schools

EVERY STUDENT DESERVES A LEGACY
2006

KnowledgeWorks Foundation

Empowering Communities to Improve Education

Pushing Change Forward

The challenge is enormous: Reinventing one of our country's oldest and most revered institutions, the American high school.

Yet it is a challenge we at KnowledgeWorks Foundation welcome. We believe that a rigorous and relevant education is not only every student's right, but also the only sure path to a brighter future for us all. We are convinced that achieving a responsive, inclusive and effective educational system is a goal that lies within our grasp.

That's why we invest our resources in initiatives with the potential to change the way education works. One of those initiatives is the creation of early college high schools that allow students to earn an associate's degree while completing high school. While this movement is still new, with the first schools opening in 2002, early results show that these students — most of whom are the first in the families to attend college — are more likely to stay in school and earn higher grades in college.

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Even so, we recognize that change on this scale is hard won. On the front lines, where teachers, students and those who support them struggle to create new ways of learning, the battle for change is fierce. Some of the obstacles they face are always moving — the constant shifting of funding priorities, legislative mandates, public support and societal needs. Others may seem immoveable — the brick wall of entrenched habits, values and expectations. It is a battle against almost insurmountable odds.

But the remarkable truth is that even in the face of all these obstacles, a contingent of heroic pioneers is pushing change forward. These hard-working, visionary and stubborn few are defying the odds. They are reinventing high school.

These are the stories of those pioneers. They are glimpses into the thousands of moments, hundreds of decisions and countless interactions that are change in progress. Even more powerfully than the statistics already showing improvements in graduation and attendance rates on these campuses, these human stories tell us that change is happening. They show us that these new schools and the people within them have already begun to touch children's lives, and that a future is on its way where every student can lay claim to a legacy of success.

Chad P. Wick, President & CEO
KnowledgeWorks Foundation

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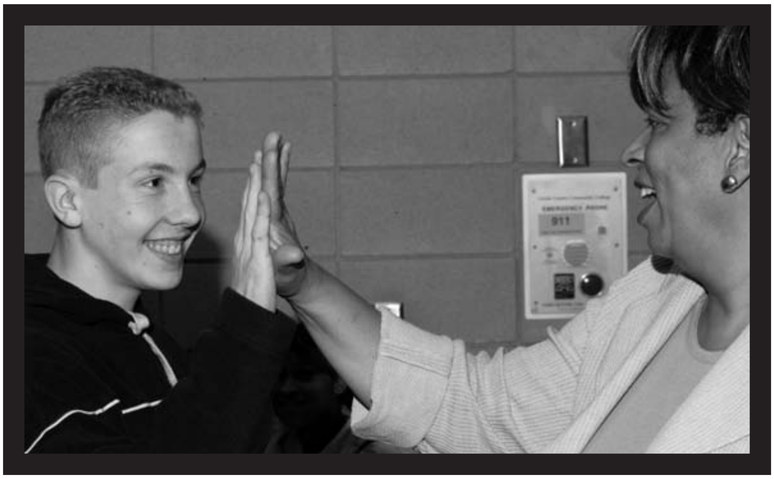


LEARNING BY DEGREE

Karlisa Smith, a student at Dayton Early College Academy, has big dreams for her future.

New Early College High Schools, A New Breed of College Students

Why do kids drop out of high school? You might expect complicated answers to that question. Answers about family issues, drug use, poverty, behavior problems and peer pressure.

All those reasons are real, and their implications for schools are enormously complicated. But those are adults' answers.

If you ask kids, most will tell you something much simpler. They were bored. The stuff they were learning had nothing to do with their lives. They couldn't see that going to high school was getting them anywhere. And nobody there much cared whether they showed up or not.

By letting students attend college during high school, these schools challenge kids in ways they've never been challenged.

In the very strictest terms, those reasons — the kids' reasons — are what early college high schools are designed to address. By letting students attend college during high school, these schools challenge kids in ways they've never been challenged. They offer classwork that leads directly to the jobs they want. They make it possible for students who can't afford tuition to get college credit or an associate's degree for free.

And because they're small, somebody cares whether every single student shows up.

Opportunity for All

Keeping kids from dropping out is, of course, just one of the problems facing today's high schools. But if educators can keep students in school — can keep them engaged and challenged — they will have gone a long way toward resolving many of the issues that keep high schools from effectively preparing students for college and careers.

That's why school districts across the country have turned to what's known as accelerated learning. These programs take many different shapes, but what they have in common is that they permit students to earn college credit while still in high school.

Although college-credit options have been part of high school for many years, until recently most targeted the academically advanced student. That began to change as businesses came to need more college-educated workers and the number of students earning college degrees didn't keep pace with demand.

On the flip side of that shortage were the growing numbers of young adults who were beginning their working lives poorly equipped for productive careers — the students who never completed high school, those who collected a diploma yet had inadequate job skills and those who chose not to continue their educations or failed at them.

Educators began to realize that the traditional path to college and career was leaving too many students stranded along the way. Another avenue was needed for those with limited incomes, those without college graduates in their family trees and those without the skills to get into or succeed in college.

That's when a new approach — one that accelerated opportunity for all students — began to emerge.

A Diploma and a Degree

Perhaps the most ambitious of these new learning options is early college high school. Instead of simply providing college-credit classes to supplement high school, these schools are intense, fully integrated programs where students complete both their high school work and an associate's degree *at the same time*.

It is a radical — and in some ways counterintuitive — idea. Rather than being sidelined while more successful students prepare for careers, kids who haven't done well academically are asked to do more and harder work. College work.

These students, many of them 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, often without the knowledge of either classmates or professors.

These schools are intense, fully integrated programs where students complete both their high school work and an associate's degree at the same time.

In return for this intensive effort, the students can earn an associate's degree or 60 hours of college credit that can be applied toward a bachelor's degree — for free. They can leave high school already qualified for a far better paying job or halfway to a four-year degree.

They aren't expected to do all this on their own, though. To help these motivated but underperforming learners, early college schools are small enough so that students can work closely with teachers who not only teach core high school classes but also provide support and guidance to help them adjust to college expectations.

While it builds on earlier programs, early college high school is a new idea. Since 2001, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other partners have invested $124 million nationally to support the creation of more than 170 early college high schools in 25 states. The first three schools in the initiative opened their doors in 2002; by 2012 some 62,000 students are expected to attend early college high schools.

By giving high school students a taste of college life and the opportunity to succeed in college, the early college high school experience gives teenagers who never considered themselves "college material" the confidence to dream bigger dreams.

Ohio's Early College Highs

KnowledgeWorks Foundation was among the first to act on the potential of the early college high schools. The philosophy behind early college fit perfectly with KnowledgeWorks Foundation's mission to increase access to high-quality education for all students.

By their fifth semester some students had already earned 45 college credits — the equivalent of a year and a half of full-time college.

KnowledgeWorks, along with its partners, set out to prove that every child can be college material — that every child can graduate from high school and succeed in college.

The first Ohio early college high school, now known as Dayton Early College Academy, opened in 2003. By 2005, six were up and running in urban areas across the state, and more were in the planning stages.

The Foundation asked these new schools to bring college to a new group of students. Each school was to consist primarily of students who were

- the first in their families to attend college
  and
- from economically disadvantaged homes.

These were the students who would pioneer early college in Ohio.

With the first early college classes yet to graduate, this bold new program has already produced results that counter common wisdom about who can succeed in college.

At Youngstown Early College, 43 students enrolled in 46 different college courses and earned an overall grade point average of 2.9.

At Dayton Early College Academy, students as a group have earned more than 1,000 hours of college credit. By their fifth semester some students had already earned 45 college credits — the equivalent of a year and a half of full-time college.

People-Powered

But of course early college high schools are not machines magically producing these results. The concept is only as effective as the high school teachers and their college counterparts who are setting high expectations for students and inspiring them to live up to those expectations. It is only as effective as the principals and parents who support those teachers. And it is only as effective as the students who overcome disadvantages to achieve more than they knew was possible.

The people creating Ohio's first early college high schools are breaking new ground. Teachers, counselors and principals struggle to help young teenagers develop the maturity they need to succeed in a college classroom and to help parents who never attended college themselves understand and support their children's journey. Students work to master difficult subject matter and, often, difficult lives.

In one school, educators must reconcile hopes for a radically different instructional approach with the realities of their students' needs. In another, a principal must calm a tenured professor whose classes are interrupted by her students' boisterous ways. Teachers battle to engage students with short attention spans and little interest in the world beyond what they know; students cope with everything from long commutes to unexpected pregnancies.

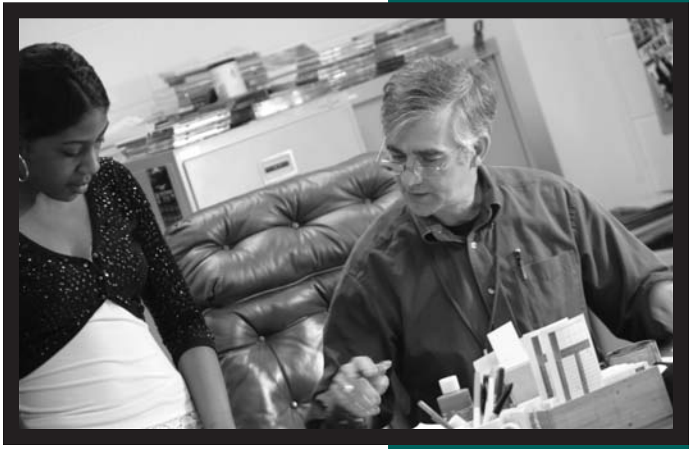
These are their stories.

EVERY STUDENT DESERVES A LEGACY

Everything was new when Toledo Early College High School opened its doors on August 22, 2005. Ninety-seven students and four teachers came together on the University of Toledo's Scott Park campus to form a school — a new school, to be sure, but not one built from scratch.

For starters, Toledo Early College's founders had the experience of a similar school to guide them. They adapted successful principles from Dayton Early College Academy, which had opened two years earlier. They decided to use similar individualized learning plans so students could progress at their own rate but to formalize certain requirements so they had more structure.

In addition, the school had a substantial building block in its experienced teaching staff. With a team of only four to teach all the core high school classes, the expertise of these veteran teachers from large urban high schools was an invaluable asset to the new venture.



Teacher Randy Nissen works with a student. Toledo Early College High School uses individualized learning plans.

Even so, melding a cohesive school from so many disparate parts wouldn't be easy. Teachers with different backgrounds and teaching styles would be asked to cooperate on cross-curricular instruction. Young teenagers who normally might not consider college — 63 percent of the school's students were the first in their families to attend college and 52 percent were from economically disadvantaged households — would have to meet rigorous academic requirements. University leaders, several of whom were new to their positions, would have to support a concept they didn't help plan.

With a team of only four to teach all the core high school classes, the expertise of these veteran teachers from large urban high schools was an invaluable asset to the new venture.

It was Year One for Toledo Early College High, and everything was new.

YEAR ONE:
NEW SCHOOL, NEW IDEAS, VETERAN TEACHERS

Toledo Early College High teacher is Paulette Dewey works with student Polly Ponce on a writing assignment.

By Larry Levy

If you stroll down an impossibly long hallway through the University of Toledo's Scott Park Building, the corridor is so quiet you could be in a church sanctuary. The clamor of college parking lots might be miles away. Angled to avoid scenes of distant traffic, tinted windows paint everything outside with a pastoral brush, rendering a view of long-necked geese under shady trees as something grander than a small park in an urban neighborhood.

But don't be fooled by the placid façade of this hallway. Tucked away in a corner of this same building is a brand-new high school dedicated to creating an innovative model for secondary education. There you will find 97 freshmen producing all the clamor and commotion you would expect during their first week of high school.

Two veteran teachers who have come to Toledo Early College from large urban high schools sit together, ignored by their new students in a noisy cafeteria. At a nearby table three boys trade iPod tunes. Two girls argue over the merits of their former schools' band programs.

The two teachers are getting to know each other as they shape and adjust to an innovative program after 50 years' combined experience in traditional classrooms. Both of them study the pastoral scene outside the tinted windows.

Paulette Dewey and Randy Nissen share an impromptu lunch meeting in his classroom.

"The geese are so beautiful," English teacher Paulette Dewey says. She is eating a sandwich and sorting through assignment handouts.

No other Toledo school has attempted to send average ninth graders into college classrooms.

Social studies instructor Randy Nissen is amused by Dewey's observation. As different as their personalities may be, they share a camaraderie grounded in common teaching experience. He smiles at her.

"Do you know how much sh-- they leave behind?" he asks.

"Well, that's the difference between us," Dewey says. "I'm the romantic. You're the practical one."

First Semester

As they begin the year, Dewey and Nissen, along with their colleagues Paul Tierney and Tim Bollin, spend a lot of time discussing cross-curricular activities to integrate their lessons. An important goal for this small school is to break down the boundaries between diverse disciplines to show students how skills and knowledge acquired in one class can be applied to another.

Principal Val Napieralski also spends a lot of time thinking about the school's mission — and wondering if she is crazy for accepting its challenge. She leads an energetic and earnest team of experienced teachers, but can the five of them bring their theoretical vision of educational reform into the real world?

No other school in the history of Toledo Public Schools has attempted to send average ninth graders into college classrooms to compete on an equal standing with high school graduates. No school has offered a project-based curriculum that crosses the boundaries of classrooms and disciplines as broadly as the one this teaching staff will strive to accomplish. No other school in the district will operate in 2005-06 without dedicated science labs or with so few computers of such poor quality. In addition, the staff is already concerned about money as they are beginning to see just how expensive operating an early college high school can be.

Napieralski knows she is challenging her veteran staff in ways they haven't been pushed before, but to make this bold experiment work, teachers like Dewey and Nissen must find a way to collaborate despite their distinctly different styles.

Nissen wears the standard teacher's apparel of dress shirt and Dockers. Dewey's wardrobe seems to have evolved to serve all functions of her trade. Glasses sit in ready position on her head. A classroom key hangs around her neck on a blue shoelace. A rubber band circles her right wrist. She and Nissen both wear practical shoes for traveling long hallways.

Dewey speaks in constant motion, shifting fluidly from topic to topic. She organizes papers and answers students' interrupting questions while she talks. She has ambitious goals for teaching a combination of life skills and language arts. Her lessons move easily from Romantic poetry to the language of popular culture.

"That lady is crazy," a student says with affection, remembering how Dewey played the theme from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and used its lyrics to show how language can be a living, breathing thing full of rhythm and humor.

"That same day, she had us reading a William Blake poem," the student says, shaking her head. She never had a teacher like Dewey in her old school.

"You just don't know what she'll come up with next."

There is so much Dewey wants to teach these kids, and it seems like there just isn't enough time to get it all done. In her daily advisory meeting with 23 students, she explains nutrition so they will make better lunchroom choices. She helps her students learn organization, textual analysis, written communication — all necessary for surviving in college classes. Her voice is animated and enthusiastic as she discusses the challenges of motivating students "who've been allowed to coast for years."

Dewey's students are reading Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and she has assigned short research and discussion topics to help them understand themes in the book. Topic choices are varied and challenge students to work creatively in small groups.

One boy explains how Dewey's approach differs from the traditional school he attended. "They'd never let us leave a classroom in a work group. They just didn't trust us."

As energetic as she is, Dewey questions the feasibility of sending more than half these kids to college classes within a year — which is the school's goal. As students work together in teams, they struggle with Bradbury's vocabulary — even before they get to the book's thematic content.

Across the hall, Randy Nissen's social studies class discusses the cultural differences between the schools they attended the previous year and Toledo Early College. Students say they miss old friends, easier lessons, personal lockers and the leisure time they had at lunch. They are glad to leave behind school uniforms, being treated as children without freedom of movement, conflict between students and boring

Paulette Dewey is in constant motion as she teaches. She has ambitious goals for teaching a combination of language arts and life skills.

classroom lessons.

Nissen's classroom is as eclectic as his own personal interests. Posters portray American heroes who range from Bob Dylan to Martin Luther King Jr. Travel memorabilia portray castles and museums in Germany and Ireland. A back table is filled with technology cobbled from personal possessions and garage sales that allows him to download, scan, project, and broadcast multimedia lessons.

"Mr. Nissen's sort of cool for a teacher," a boy says. "He knows a lot about music and stuff you've never heard of."

When a student asks a question about Mississippi blues, Nissen goes to his computer and quickly plays an example for everyone to hear.

Nissen's enthusiasms are obvious, but he never overwhelms his students. His sense of humor is quiet, although not necessarily gentle. He explains lessons as if he's just figuring them out along with the class, asking leading questions as prompts.

"So what do you think of this music?" he asks as if it puzzles him as much as it does his class, a technique that effectively elicits responses.

As long as Toledo Early College students are contained in their own classrooms, they coexist well with their university neighbors. Problems are beginning to surface, however, during classroom changes. When Toledo Early College lets out its students, an audible wave of energy explodes through the building. The kids are boisterous and happy — typical 14-year-olds. Two boys swing their book bags in combat. Three girls giddily trade mock insults. One boy sings to a tune only he can hear on headphones.

Napieralski addresses the students' noise level at a staff meeting in September. "We must address this issue now," she says.

Dewey points out that "they're just acting their age, which wouldn't be a problem in regular high school," but here, she says, they need to blend in with an older college crowd and refrain from disrupting classes.

The day before, a tenured professor blocked the rush of high schoolers outside his classroom by holding a cane across their path. He told them he'd been teaching for more than 30 years and had never heard anything like this noise in a college. Rock music could be heard through his wall. For a full five minutes at the end of the day, kids ran and shouted outside his door. And, he insisted vehemently, it wasn't reasonable for him to take it any longer.

"He came into my office and waved the cane at me," Napieralski says. "'They have no business being here,' he told me. 'They should go back to Scott where they came from.'"

To Napieralski, the professor's reference to a predominantly black high school has racist implications, as if the kids' skin color rather than their age is influencing their behavior. She will have to discuss the issue with her university liaison, along with recent concerns about orientation classes.

Dewey is concerned that disruptive behavior might be a problem when the high schoolers begin taking college classes next semester.

"Some students were showing their immaturity during orientation classes," she says.

Randy Nissen answers Kristen Edwards' questions before class. One students says, "Mr. Nissen's sort of cool for a teacher."

"The professor may not be experienced in adjusting his presentation to a high school audience, but that isn't an excuse for kids to sleep, carry on private conversations and talk to him disrespectfully during his classes."

"He's never dealt with this age group before," Napieralski says. "He's got 50 kids packed into his room — which is a challenge by itself — and he's treating them like they were 20 years old. He wants to have open discussions with kids who don't even understand his vocabulary. But, again, it's the kids' responsibility to act right."

Two months into the school year, the students' maturity is still a problem, but it's improving. The halls are somewhat quieter, but there are other discipline problems.

> **"I want my students to come into the classroom, open their notebooks and begin class fully prepared and ready to ask questions. And I want it now."**
>
> *— Paulette Dewey, teacher*

"They still have trouble making classroom transitions," Nissen says. "If you disrupt the flow of discussion to ask for everyone to take out pencils or open books, there is an undercurrent of restless shifting. I have to ask for their attention after each request for an action."

Dewey says this is true of ninth graders in any school, but she's still concerned about her students being ready to enter college classrooms. She wishes more of them could accept greater levels of responsibility.

"I want my students to come into the classroom, open their notebooks and begin class fully prepared and ready to ask questions," she says. "And I want it now. I have maybe five or six students who are there already, but it's slow. All of them are better now than they were, but I'm not patient. You have to remember, these kids have never had to do anything before. All they had to do was show up to class and complete their homework to get good grades. We're pushing them to do much more."

Principal Val Napieralski summarizes her teachers' accomplishments during the last week of school: "Maybe it's too early to draw deep conclusions, but it seems like we're actually imparting learning here."

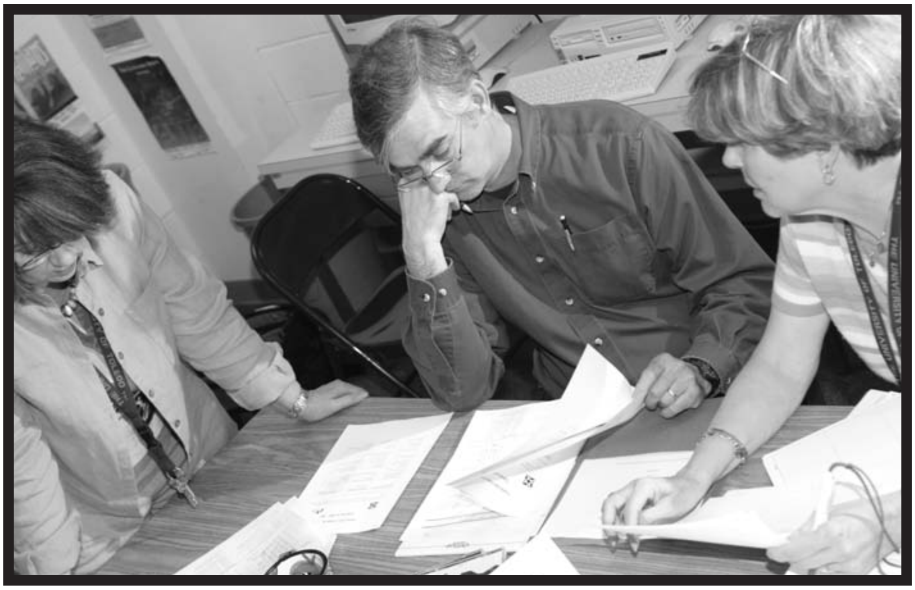
In the days before winter break, each student must present a challenging multigenre research project that combines content from Nissen's social studies class with skills from Dewey's English class while demonstrating mastery of technology resources. This gateway project will determine which students are ready to enroll in college classes for spring term and which will have to wait until next fall.

Students will give presentations before an audience of peers, teachers, administrators and outside visitors. They chose from 46 topics ranging from the industrial revolution to the space race, completed extensive research and provided explanations in at least 10 writing genres, with an expository or personal essay mandatory.

"If we presented an assignment of this complexity at Woodward [Nissen's former school], maybe 20 percent of the kids would do it. Here, we have higher expectations; we'll get 80 percent finishing it," Nissen says.

"These projects could only be done in an environment like this," Dewey answers. "Where teachers work together and support kids individually if they need help."

During two days of presentations, most students show confidence and obvious preparation — even though it's the first time most of them have stood before a large audience.



At the end of the school day, Val Napieralski meets with Randy Nissen and Paulette Dewey to review plans for cross-curricular projects for next semester.

For Napieralski and her staff, however, too many are awkward, with students simply reading words off slides. Sometimes illustrations don't match topics. Some slides are obviously plagiarized. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin is introduced as "one of the world's greatest leaders, who did some really great things and some other things that weren't good."

As a result of this assignment, the staff decides that nine students need serious remedial work, and 19 have earned the opportunity to take college classes during winter semester.

Second Semester

As Toledo Early College High School begins its second semester, the success of the first semester's cross-curricular work gives Dewey and Nissen confidence to go into greater depth by combining lessons in government with literary studies.

Dewey stalks the length of her silent classroom, challenging freshmen to pay attention.

"What is propaganda?" she asks. "What does it mean?"

Two-thirds of her students are with her, watching closely to see what she does next, working to understand what this lesson — based on a speech from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* — is all about.

"Propaganda means propagating or telling only one opinion or one way of looking at things. We know there is never only one way of looking at things. Right? A propagandist only tells his opinion."

As she teaches about propaganda, she tries to draw out a variety of interpretations.

"Orwell's not writing about animals," she says. "He's writing about every revolution that has occurred since the beginning of time."

Dewey refers to lessons learned in Nissen's social studies class across the hall, making comparisons between Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and the struggle between American Democrats and Republicans.

Dewey works the room the way a politician or a preacher might. She walks around so she can face her students one at a time. She punctuates her words with rhythmic hand motions. Her right index finger strikes three beats. Pause. Her left index finger strikes four beats. It takes a lot of energy to do this four times per day, five days a week for 30-some years. But she knows her method works. Each of her 19 students who began college classes is keeping up with the work.

Throughout her career Dewey realized something was wrong in the "big box" approach to education. In large schools, disciplines were presented as separate entities. English teachers didn't plan lessons with anyone outside their department, so there was no continuity between what a student learned from one hour to the next. If a student skipped class, there was no way to track him. If he missed homework assignments, there wasn't much recourse beyond grade assignments.

In a school with fewer than 100 freshmen, there is no place for one of them to hide.

"When I did my research on small schools, I began to see how larger schools were failures in so many ways. They could never meet the needs of all their students," she says. "They served the kids who came to class regularly and who completed their homework — even if it was superficially done — but so many kids were just left out of the process."

When Toledo Public Schools administrators announced they were creating a new small high school on the University of Toledo's Scott Park campus, Dewey applied without hesitation.

"It was a chance to put into practice the theoretical ideas I'd studied and thought about. I could work on a team to create a model for educating more students than traditional large schools could ever reach. I was motivated by the chance to make a real difference in our district."

Dewey uses every opportunity to make that difference. Even after a long day of high-energy performance, she stays after class to answer questions about assignments. When she realizes that a boy failed to do his homework, she tracks him down and makes him finish it on the spot. In a school with fewer than 100 freshmen, there is no place for one of them to hide.

Dewey sits in her classroom at the end of the day and looks around. "There isn't a morning when I wake up dreading the day," she says. "I feel so much more effective here than I ever have in my years of teaching. Working in a team with other teachers, I can respond to individual needs of my students."

Nissen's motivation for teaching at Toledo Early College is similar. When he first heard about the experiment, he knew it was the opportunity he'd been waiting for to rejuvenate his love for teaching. Two years before, he'd been the driving force behind a feasibility study for implementing a small schools program at Woodward. Even after his peers failed to approve the change, Nissen kept his enthusiasm.

"There was a group of older teachers, when I first taught, who gave me a feel for what it could be like to work collaboratively," he says. 'But that generation is gone now. For the most part, a teacher in a big school today is like an island. He's insulated from other departments. The kinds of regular meetings we have where we design innovative projects for the individual needs of our students never took place at Woodward."

A Student Culture Forms

Toledo Early College is a new high school, and traditions that will carry forward for many years are only beginning to form.

Before the school day begins, kids congregate in the resource center, where they can work and play on computers. Because they don't have school buses, some of the kids travel as long as two hours to reach school from all parts of the city. The center provides a place where they can rest or hang out with their friends.

Toledo Early College High School, located on the Scott Park Campus of the University of Toledo, gives students the chance to sample the college experience while still in high school.

As quiz bowl and chess teams organize, they call more attention to themselves than they would in a larger school that offers bands and sports teams. Because Toledo Early College has only freshmen this first year, it will be difficult for them to compete against four-year schools, but they are preparing for coming years when, as they add classes, they gain depth and experience.

Students preparing to publish the school's first newspaper search for a name that will represent their school:

"The *Young Rockets* says we're part of the college; like the U.T. Rockets, and the name says so."

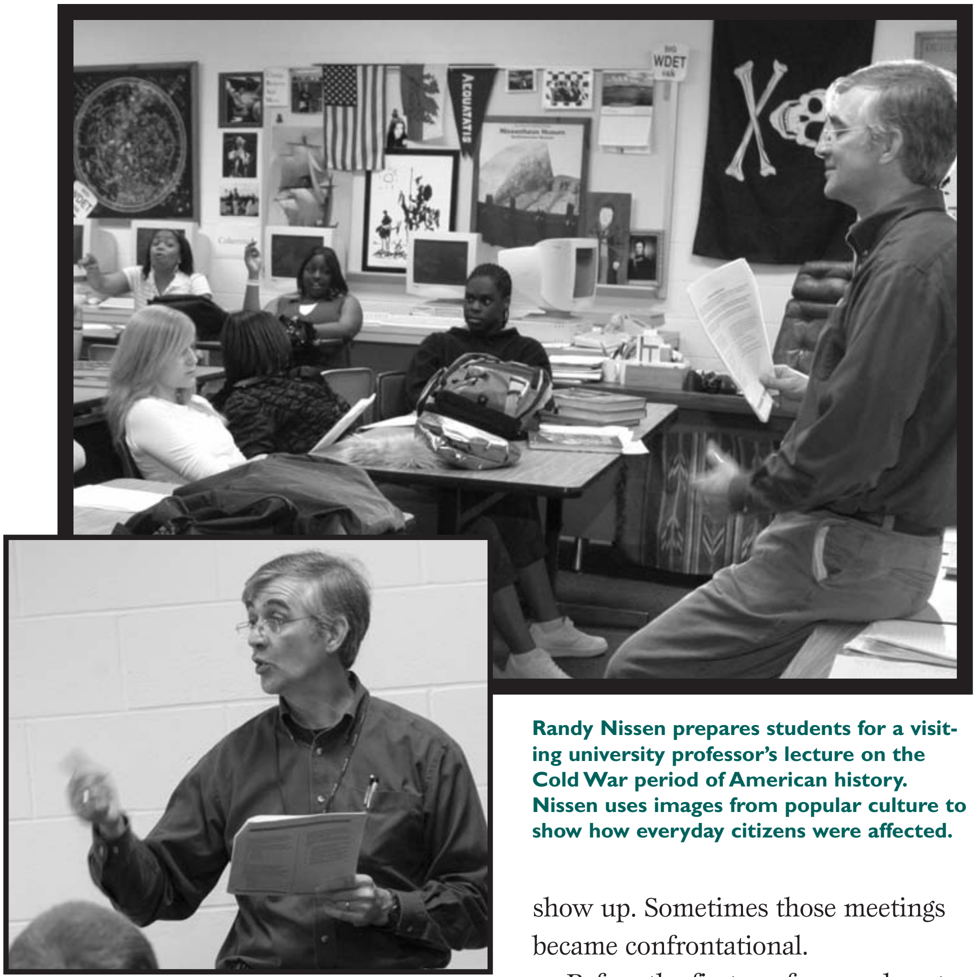
"*Kaboom!* It's new and alive and dramatic. It's like look at us! We're here. Pay attention!"

"*Shooting Star* says we're going higher than others. We're going to college and then further. We're taking off like shooting stars."

When the votes are counted, the results are a surprise. Instead of the names proposed by the more vocal proponents, *TECHS Messenger* wins the contest.

Knitting takes over some classrooms. As part of Nissen's unit on the industrial revolution, Dewey taught the kids to knit. Now everyone — boys as well as girls — knits during class, waiting for buses, during lunchtime.

Clubs, newspaper, a knitting fad — they're all signs of a school forming traditions for the first time.



Randy Nissen prepares students for a visiting university professor's lecture on the Cold War period of American history. Nissen uses images from popular culture to show how everyday citizens were affected.

Nissen was frustrated by students who wandered in and out of classes, who lingered in noisy hallways during class time, and whose attendance was irregular. Fights were a normal part of the school day. As much as 50 percent of teaching time was spent dealing with class management issues.

Frustrated parents, alienated from the system, exacerbated the situation. They demanded to know why graduates rarely attended college, why the graduation rate was less than 50 percent, and why standardized test scores were so low. On conference nights, Nissen would sit alone in his classroom waiting to meet with them. Typically, five or 10 out of 120 would show up. Sometimes those meetings became confrontational.

Before the first conference day at Toledo Early College, the staff decides to develop a new model for these meetings. They want to find ways of easing tension and engaging parents in dialogue about their children's progress. They want parents to work as partners with the school, developing personal goals for their children and supporting efforts to achieve them.

"I'm more into showing parents samples of work, so they can see what their kids are doing, instead of just looking at numbers in a grade book," Napieralski says. "We're getting these kids ready for college classes, so we need to explain to the parents what it will take to prepare each of them."

To get ready for conference day, Nissen compiles files of student work and passes out forms to guide students through a process of self-evaluation. When the day arrives, he sits at his desk, in the classroom filled with music and history posters, reviewing his written notes and evaluations. One by one, groups of parents and students come into the classroom for meetings designed to forge relationships rather than confrontations.

When the day ends, Nissen is delighted to discover he had 100 percent attendance. At Woodward, also a Toledo high school, 20 percent would have been an amazing triumph. He is convinced that the small schools concept of involving students in the evaluation process helped them feel comfortable bringing their parents into meetings with their teachers.

The triumph is well timed to lift Nissen's spirits. Only a few weeks earlier, he had approached midyear burnout, worn down by the long hours he was investing in individualized lessons and the lack of privacy that resulted from close relationships he'd developed with his students. Kids use up his planning time to ask for help, and there isn't even a teachers' lounge to recuperate in. Furthermore, it's discouraging to provide so many opportunities for students who don't always seem to appreciate them.

In January, Nissen and Dewey accompany their students to a Black History Month program on the main University of Toledo campus. Speakers include author Joan Morgan, who speaks on New Black

> **"It's not unusual for us to stay here till six or seven o'clock at night because a kid needs to talk and there's nobody else in his life willing to listen."**
>
> *— Val Napieralski, principal*

Feminism, and several prominent journalists who discuss positive and negative aspects of hip-hop culture.

Nissen is frustrated by his students' reactions to the program. They fidget and yawn as you'd expect from high school freshmen at a college event, but they also seem to have little empathy for world events outside their experience. Nissen connects their attitudes with a general aversion to reading anything not assigned and their craving entertainment for its own sake. When the Black History Month presentations aren't flashy, students quickly withdraw their attention.

"Their maturity level is just so low," Nissen complains to Dewey on the return trip.

"That may be true, but only a few months ago, today's field trip would have been a different story," she says. "We couldn't have taken them to a college event on the main campus and expected them to be so inconspicuous. They are so much better behaved today; it's like the difference between night and day."

Nissen smiles in agreement. "I guess you're right," he says. "But I always want so much more for them."

"Me too," Dewey says.

In March, Dewey and Nissen receive good news. Toledo Public Schools releases statistics showing that Toledo Early College has the highest attendance rate of any school in the district. Nissen attributes this to the partnerships they're forging with parents.

"When parents agree with a school's goals and understand what their kids need to do day to day, they'll make sure their kids don't miss anything," he says.

When the Ohio Graduation Test practice exam scores are tabulated a month later, Nissen responds gleefully.

"Have you seen the test scores?" he asks a visitor. "Our freshmen, competing with Toledo Public Schools sophomores, were either first or second in the district in all categories. It's amazing."

Napieralski explains her school's strong performance by emphasizing the strength of her staff.

"Their incredible work ethic and cooperative attitude has made all the difference," she says. "At the beginning of the year, we didn't know how veteran teachers with established ways of doing things would work together, but it turned out to be our school's greatest strength. Kids spending more time in core classes is another advantage. When you eliminate gym, pep rallies and assemblies and concentrate on four main classes plus a foreign language, you gain hours of instruction time you don't have in traditional schools. The teachers made good use of this advantage."

During the last week of school, Napieralski summarizes the school's accomplishments:

"We've established a project-based learning model built on an integrated curriculum, just as we said we'd do. Kids are receiving the benefits of a small school environment where they get individualized attention. Every staff member knows each kid by name and knows him well. It's not unusual for us to stay here till six or seven o'clock at night because a kid needs to talk and there's nobody else in his life willing to listen."

Napieralski smiles before adding: "Maybe it's too early to draw deep conclusions, but it seems like we're actually imparting learning here."

Dewey agrees. From the first day of school, she has never wavered in her belief that she could contribute to creating a new model for secondary education.

"We established high expectations for student achievement. Then we repeated them over and over until everyone believed these kinds of results were possible," Dewey says.

"We are a success story," Napieralski proclaims. "I really believe it."

About the storyteller

Larry Levy is director of the Glass House Writing Project, a nonprofit program that supports the teaching of creative writing in schools. He also teaches writing to children in prison and is working on his first novel.

Lorain County Early College High School • Elyria, Ohio

As Lorain County Early College High School began its second year in the fall of 2005, the puzzle pieces that would have to come together for it to succeed were only partly in place.

The school — established as a partnership among Elyria City Schools, Lorain City Schools and the Lorain County Community College — had started the previous year with 60 students from Elyria. With the first group of Lorain students just arriving, the school had yet to blend teachers, students and parents from the two perennial rivals into a single cohesive identity located on the campus of the Lorain County Community College.

Principal Roslyn Valentine

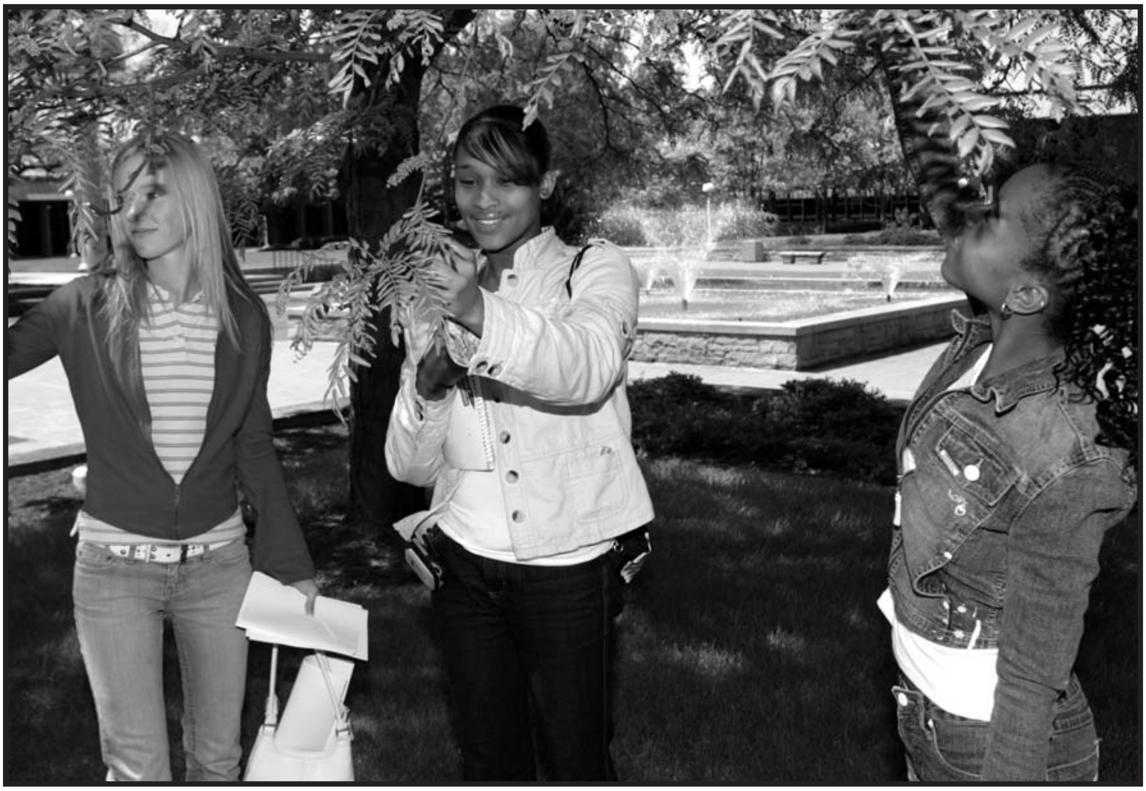
Principal Roslyn Valentine had weathered the school's first year with her generous store of energy and enthusiasm intact, and was supported by a team of teachers who managed to overcome the chaos of the early days to craft interdisciplinary instruction. But a new group of teachers, added to accommodate the second year's influx of students, appeared less committed to the early college approach, and it was unclear whether Valentine's passion would inspire or alienate them.

Progress during the 2005-06 school year would be measured in small pieces — puzzle pieces painstakingly sorted and fitted to form the picture of a school.

Even more important was the question of student preparedness. The early college highs are designed to serve students from low-income families, some of whom have only spotty support for educational pursuits at home, and many students struggled with the academic rigor.

So for Lorain County Early College High School, progress during the 2005-06 school year would be measured in small pieces — puzzle pieces painstakingly sorted and fitted to form the picture of a school.

YEAR TWO:
THE SOUNDS OF GROWTH—DISCORD OR HARMONY?



Sophomores Jordan Lottman, Taylor Wiltz and Jalisa' Stevens scour the grounds outside Lorain County Early College High during a science scavenger hunt.

By Catherine Gabe

Principal Roslyn Valentine stands in a room full of teachers and drums. She says little as one of the people leading the professional development retreat introduces the idea of a drum circle. "Okay, this might seem a bit hokey at first," he says, "but I think you'll like it."

Valentine picks up a drum for herself and begins thrusting drums into the hands of her staff, urging them to shake off the after-lunch malaise. While students are on their winter break, this is an opportunity for teachers from Lorain County Early College High School to gather at a Lake Erie resort to relax and regroup.

But drums? A few teachers roll their eyes. Others sigh as if to say, "You want us to do *what*?"

For sophomore Darian Robbins, attending Early College means leaving old friends behind to forge a new path for himself.

“Pick a drum,” urges Ed Boas, a professional drum circle facilitator who takes over.

Some rest the big drums awkwardly in their laps. A few self-consciously set their drums to the side, cautiously testing the sound with one finger: *tap, tap, tappity, tap*.

“We do drum circles for all different reasons,” Boas explains. “It helps with communication.”

He looks around. A few smile, still others eye him skeptically.

“There is no right way to do this,” Boas continues, tapping his drum a bit.

Slowly, a few begin drumming. Gwen Gilmore, 10th-grade math teacher, beams a wide smile and begins pounding away on a congo drum. *Bat-a-bat-bat-bat*. Gilmore is a natural leader with an emphasis on the can-do — she’s also an adjunct professor and a pastor. Others look to her and begin adding their sounds. *Patter, patter. Thrum. Da, da, dum.*

Quick, fast, slow, off the beat.

“It’s always different at first,” Boas says, the noise growing around him. “But eventually, a song comes out of it.”

Valentine is hoping the drumming exercise translates back to the classroom so her staff members will suspend their skepticism and jump in without waiting to be pushed.

Valentine, a strong, decisive leader, is hoping the exercise translates back to the classroom so her staff members will suspend their skepticism and jump in without waiting to be pushed. She is looking for leaders. Too often, everyone looks to her to solve the problems of this early college high school in its second year. The veteran administrator spends far too much of her time providing no-nonsense solutions to parents, teachers, staff and students. She pushes, prods and nudges.

But there’s only so much a strong leader can do alone. Though she accepts that the public doesn’t understand the idea behind the school, Valentine is coming to the even more disconcerting realization that nearly half her staff doesn’t either. They volunteered for the assignment, but many believed they would be teaching academically high-caliber students. What they discover is that because Early College High targets students who might not otherwise be considered college material, some of its students are barely ready for high school.

Is her staff on board? It’s a question Valentine will ask herself time and again this year. Jeffrey Jaroscak, a coach supplied by KnowledgeWorks Foundation to help get the school off the ground, is the person she confides in most. He sees the dilemma clearly: “The leadership is working, but sometimes I think Roz is holding the entire place together.”

Dissonance

As the first semester progresses, uncompleted assignments are piling up among freshmen. The remedy? Valentine and her ninth-grade staff launch Friday Night School in November — a mandatory two hours after school for anyone missing three or more assignments in a week.

The rooms are jammed on the first Friday. Some students work on their assignments. With the work quickly completed, the kids hang out. A few play card games. Some rest their heads on desks, napping. Girls put on makeup or comb their hair.

Although Friday night school reduces the number of missing assignments, staffing soon becomes a struggle. Assessing its success is also a problem.

Valentine pushes her ninth-grade staff along: "What are you using to determine or gauge if this program is successful? Are students coming just to socialize?"

The staff can't answer her questions, and the program continues. But it doesn't accomplish its goal. Students are getting their work done in the Friday night sessions, but they're still not turning assignments in on time.

The staff decides students must make up work and get no credit. But Valentine vetoes the idea. "That's double punishment," says Valentine, usually the most ardent disciplinarian of the bunch. "I won't allow it."

When teachers don't come up with another approach for turning the sessions into a more effective deterrent and let the program slide, Valentine doesn't step in. She decides to let them suffer the consequences.

Within weeks, missing assignments are again on the rise among not only the freshmen but sophomores as well.

By spring, teachers are barking at students, reminding them to buckle down. Not only are the missing assignments making life stressful, but every week teachers must carve out time to prepare sophomores for the Ohio Graduation Test, helping them with study skills, writing ability and course content.

Throughout the year, Valentine waits for teachers to take the initiative on problems like these. It doesn't happen quickly, and the friction between the principal and some of her teachers doesn't help.

Some teachers grumble about her toughness; others interrupt staff meetings trying for a quick laugh. Valentine eyes them down and confronts them at a later meeting,

When Life Intrudes

Sophomore Taylor Wiltz (left) with Principal Roslyn Valentine and Counselor Rosey Wagner.

At another school, Taylor Wiltz's story could easily have had a different ending.

When the sophomore at Lorain Early College High became pregnant, she was scared to break the news. "I didn't know how I would tell my mother," she says. "I knew she would be disappointed in me."

But Taylor isn't in a large, anonymous high school. Her school has just more than 100 students, and she is close to her teachers and counselors. She turned to those adults for help. Her principal and counselor sat with Taylor while she talked to her mother.

"It was hard…," Taylor remembers. "She was mad."

With a little help, the 16-year-old and her mother got through that crisis and are closer now. Taylor returned to school just six days after her son's birth, never missed any of her OGT testing and now gets mostly As and Bs. She hopes to be a nurse.

"I still feel like a regular college student, but there is more on my shoulders," she says. "I have to juggle a lot and motivate myself to get a degree to make sure I make something of myself."

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Teacher Gwen Gilmore works to build math skills that will pass muster on the Ohio Graduation Test, as well as preparing her students for college-level courses.

saying, "I like to play as a team member. This is where I'm most comfortable. When that doesn't happen, it makes me play principal and I don't like it."

Some of the teachers keep waiting for her to lighten up.

It will be a long wait.

Valentine is focused on the early college mission. She demands teamwork, commitment and responsibility from both staff and students. She won't tolerate less.

Witness her at a November Study Skills class: "Did I lose control somewhere along the line and give it to you?" she asks the class, reminding them of things needed for next week's session. "The longer it takes everyone to remember, the longer I take to ask the questions. I get paid a salary. I do not get paid by the hour, which means if I have to stay here till six or seven tonight, I will be here. I'm only responsible for myself. If I take action for myself, the rest of you will all fall in."

Principal Rosyln Valentine beams as she tells sophomore Jordan Lottman she aced both college and high school classes.

Valentine is focused on the early college mission. She demands teamwork, commitment and responsibility from both staff and students. She won't tolerate less.

And one by one, they do.

Valentine's tough demeanor doesn't completely hide how deeply she cares.

A native of southeastern Ohio, rooted deep in Appalachia, she is herself a first-generation college student and says she's the poster child for the Early College program. It took her three times to get through college.

"For the first time in my life, I really believe in something," she says. "This is my passion."

But her passion has been tempered by grief. During her first year at Early College, her husband, Mark, was diagnosed with cancer and died. "Since then I have become more of an observer than a participant," Valentine says. She is reluctant to say more and turns away to hide her pain. "It was like I was gone for a while, but I'm back."

She does smile and laugh, but it's always with an eye toward her job. She confronts students about their behavior. "I swear to God I will meet your boyfriends," she tells two girls for whom she's started the paperwork to revoke their driver's licenses for being continually late to school. "If they are affecting attendance at my Early College, I will meet them."

She tells another student caught in an infraction, "Okay, not only do I find you in the college bookstore where you're not supposed to be, but you're buying a candy bar, too. Now go."

But she has the students' devotion. They scamper around her like puppies. Whenever she is in the hallways, it's "Ms. Valentine. Ms. Valentine, look." They show her their latest grade reports. "Maddie, that's great. All A's — that's the first time this year, right? Great."

Amber Webb, a 10th grader says, "Mrs. Valentine should get a Nobel Prize for this. She has done everything to get us to stay and she devotes so much of her time to stay after school."

Despite this, the freshman class is struggling. Many of the students don't have basic math and reading skills. By midwinter, 25 of the 60 freshmen are failing algebra. Poor preparation, problems at home or lack of study skills might be to blame, but at this point teachers and administrators focus on pounding basics into kids' heads. The solution is an early morning math intervention program over several weeks. Twelve freshmen improve, but 13 are still failing by year's end. They'll have to take summer school and get up to speed before next fall.

Freshman Rachel Sanchez, an all-A student, wants to be a teacher and already is on her way, often tutoring her peers.

Unlike regular high schools, everything is accelerated here to earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree in just four years. For many, this is their single hope for rising out of the mire of Lorain County's struggling economy, which is desperately trying to shed its dependence on dying steel and manufacturing-based industries.

The enticement is even stronger because the program is free to those selected to attend. But Valentine wants it known that the program is anything but free; the price includes leaving friends and home schools behind for plenty of hard work and no place to hide.

> **"Mrs. Valentine should get a Nobel Prize for this. She has done everything to get us to stay and she devotes so much of her time to stay after school."**
>
> *— Amber Webb, student*

In March, Valentine takes parents to task at a mandatory parent meeting: "If your child is in this school and they are in college courses and they fail college courses, they will not have a high school diploma. The stakes are high. You have to decide as a family what you need to do to be successful."

Perhaps it's because this school is so small and has so few diversions that drama and crisis sometimes seem to be the order of the day.

One day it might be a breakup between a boyfriend and girlfriend; on another, a student comes to school drunk. No drugs are found during a locker sweep, but a student is expelled for having vodka. On yet another day, race issues simmering for months boil over.

In these hallways filled with only 100 students, mistakes seem to echo more loudly.

Amber Gray, one of Valentine's prize students, sports several body piercings and can usually be seen wearing plaid pants, toe socks and shirts advertising Rancid, her favorite rock group. Amber, who longs to be a journalist, is often an ambassador to visitors and is pointed out as someone who can speak — and write — eloquently about the school.

In early spring, Amber pens a petition signed by 35 of the sophomore class claiming that some students get preferential treatment. Students have been grumbling about a peer who was never disciplined for taking a teacher's keys and driving her car around the parking lot. Valentine first learns about that student's misdeeds through an anonymous note. The second and louder way she hears about it is through the petition, which doesn't name the student.

The petition blindsides Valentine, but if she has been sucker punched, she doesn't show it. Yet she clearly is not happy about this public way of bringing the problem to light. She walks more forcefully, talks more loudly.

She faces the issue head on, canceling classes all day for students who signed the petition. They have to attend three consecutive sessions to explore their complaints. Her message is clear: things must change and the problem must be addressed. Now.

"I'm really listening to your concerns," Valentine says, pacing in front of the classroom. "I am not trying to ignore them. I want to talk about the things I heard you were frustrated about. Jennifer, give me a specific example."

"Like when someone is rude and disrespectful."

"Obnoxious," someone adds.

"That's too general," Valentine counters.

Sophomores Randi Bolyard and Brittany Bell find Early College means leaning on new friends.

Students offer a variety of behaviors: singing in class, talking out, cell phone use, listening to music.

"Interruptions," Valentine writes on the board. "Where are you going?" she says to a student getting up.

"He was going to get some tissue," someone explains. "What's wrong with that?"

The mood in the school has changed. Students are working more cooperatively. They are focused on a new drama — passing the Ohio Graduation Test.

"You have to ask to throw something away," Valentine says, deciding to use this as a teachable moment. "The fact that you can get up and walk in front of us, would you do the same if we were sitting in a church pew?"

Disrespect. Discrimination. Lack of accountability. Those are the top three items students say trouble this school.

"Look inside yourself," Valentine says. "You want this school to work, then look inside yourself. Some of you are doing this. It's so easy to complain; some just whine and complain about it."

Before the meeting ends, Valentine turns to the students: "Do not, under any circumstances, think that what you do today changes what I have to do legally. If charges are pressed against this student, he could go to jail. If they aren't pressed, he is out of school for 10 days."

Over the next days, the students

Students doing some hands-on learning in a college ceramics class include Mykel Williams (left); Maygan Hulbert (inset top) and Amber Gray (inset bottom).

meet with counselor Rosey Wagner and several other teachers. Students conclude they're also guilty of the things they're accusing the administration of. They take ownership and responsibility.

The student whose treatment provoked the petition is suspended for 10 days. By the time he returns, the mood in the school has changed. Students are working more cooperatively. They are focused on a new drama — passing the Ohio Graduation Test.

The OGT, which Ohio students must pass to earn a high school diploma beginning in 2007, measures proficiency in reading, writing, math, science and social studies. Students take the test for the first time in the spring of their sophomore year. Aware that they must score well in all five subject areas, the Lorain County 10th graders are getting edgy and crack jokes about whether they'll pass or pass out. When a student asks Valentine about an outing to an amusement park, she answers, "We have to find out whether we pass the OGT, or whether we will be going somewhere at all."

One student says, "Our moms are going to be sending us CARE packages down here. It will be like a dormitory until they're over."

Another: "It'll be like prison duty."

Another: "We'll be on full lockdown."

Signs of Hope

Well into the second semester, Valentine is still pushing teachers to do whatever it takes to bring students along.

"This isn't a program about anything other than getting these students out and through," she tells her staff. "Our mission is that we're doing everything we can for these students."

She expects extra effort from the teachers. "Some of us don't understand how they have lived in a continual crisis, but for some that's normal," Valentine explains. "These are kids who live in a crisis mode, but here, they are our purpose; here, they are struggling."

Valentine understands their reality. "These are kids who take care of their parents," she says. "Very few of them have what most people think of as the American family. Two-thirds live with single parents, six have lost parents to cancer, some of their parents are on drugs or alcohol addicted. There are pregnancies."

By year's end, two students' siblings die tragic deaths. The suicide of another student from a neighboring district jars the lives of several at Early College.

"Resiliency," Valentine sighs. "I am amazed at kids who are able to forget what goes on at home and come to school to work."

A class ring is more than jewelry for Early College students — it's also a talisman, a sign of hope that they will earn not only a diploma but also a degree.

Midway through the year, a tangible sign of what these students are working toward arrives. Class rings are in for 10th graders.

A flood of students stream to Gilmore's classroom. Aside from grades and paperwork, the rings are the first symbols to help them dream beyond the snow outside, the work they're doing, their home lives. Maybe they really will do this.

As Leah Madding opens her ring box her eyes pop wide open. She places the ring on her right hand: a perfect starburst of pink. One side of the band is inscribed with "EHS" for Elyria High School, the first graduating class from Early College, and the other with "Early College."

The rest of the year, Leah wears the ring, which she sometimes fingers nervously in class before softly answering a question. Valentine can't believe the rings cost $350 — 10 times more than hers did. But for many it's a necessity, a talisman; a visible sign that they are in this for the long haul.

Leader of the Band

In April, to her chagrin, Valentine is still leading her small band of teachers. She's doing too much. She leans on a podium, crutches propped on the wall behind her. She's still recovering from surgery a few weeks earlier for her torn meniscus, the shock absorber for her left knee.

This night, nearly 200 parents and students from various school districts in the county are eager to learn about the school.

Lorain County Early College is currently a blend of two school districts. The first year's students, now sophomores, signed on from the Elyria school district, the county seat. The 2005-06 freshmen came from Lorain City schools to the north. The two communities have such a long history of feuding it's been described as a civil war.

> **"I am amazed at kids who are able to forget what goes on at home and come to school to work."**
>
> *— Roslyn Valentine, principal*

The latest skirmish between the two began in the winter, when Elyria decided to take a year off from the Early College program, primarily because it didn't want to lose the per-pupil funding from the state that follows the student to Early College. Elyria would send students to Early College in the coming years.

But in the spring Elyria officials are offended when Lorain administrators mass-mail an open letter inviting students across the county, even those attending Elyria, to attend Early College through open enrollment. Elyria officials are angry that their logo appears on the letter without their consent, as if they are endorsing the program. They quickly begin distancing themselves from Early College, publicly urging students to do the same.

Despite Elyria's plea to students, 18 voice some interest in attending. That could mean a loss of $90,000 for the Elyria district. "That's not chump change either," says Valentine, bracing for a fight. "That could be three new teachers."

Valentine knows this is a battle she's not likely to win. She's spent

Principal Roslyn Valentine high-fives sophomore Thomas Jordan for passing college Spanish.

this past year trying to meld one staff out of these two completely different districts, teachers whose hiring is entirely beyond her control and based on union contracts.

But tonight at the podium she has other battles to fight. She's poised to sell her program. Honestly.

"This is a program of hard work," she proclaims. "Attendance is an issue. Tardies count. Absences count." She scans the roomful of parents and caregivers and says, "Who really is interested in this program — is it you, or is it your child?"

She knows it's vital for the students to be as motivated as their parents. Unless she gets the students on board, Valentine is clear that the program will fail.

"By 10th grade you have lost them. They are starting to grow up and make their own independent choices."

At the end of the evening, a line of students wait to talk with Valentine about coming to Early College. She has won a small victory.

The Sounds of Victory

In early June, Valentine sequesters 10th graders in the college's cafeteria. She's there to announce their results on the OGT, but she's not ready yet. "I have been excited for five days," she tells them. "Why? I guess I am always going to be your mother. How many of you remember your first day?"

A few share stories: Samantha Allegier cried for two weeks straight. Justin Arbogast was the politest kid ever. She shushes the crowd.

"This truly is a party. We had 98 percent passage rate on the OGTs! Everyone in here passed all five OGTs." She beams and the room erupts into cheers, hugs, tears, high fives. There is reason for celebration; they are above the state average in the percentage achieving the two highest designations in every area but science.

Cell phones immediately come out.

"And I will take those cell phones," Valentine says just as swiftly, her authoritative voice gathering respect.

"You didn't just pass. Many of you were at an accelerated or an advanced level. You have worked hard. You passed the OGT. It was painful. You passed college Spanish. You are halfway through this. You are halfway through your college education."

Teachers slice into a large sheet cake boasting "Congratulations Ohio Graduation Test Success." In minutes kids are chattering, tossing down cake and ice cream. Soon, a frosting fight breaks out.

Strong, fierce Roslyn Valentine has lost control. She smiles. This time it's music to her ears.

About the storyteller

Catherine Gabe has a B.A. in journalism from The University of Minnesota. She has worked as a newspaper reporter in Minnesota, Iowa, Massachusetts and most recently, at *The Plain Dealer*, in Cleveland. She is based in Oberlin, Ohio where she freelances; her recent work includes a book about osteoporosis written with a Cleveland Clinic Foundation doctor.

When Dayton Early College Academy opened in 2003, it was one of just 21 schools in the country implementing the early college approach. As a pioneer brimming with potential, DECA received a flood of national attention from places such as the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Jobs for the Future, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

It was not surprising that the school drew notice. Established as a partnership between Dayton Public Schools and the University of Dayton, DECA not only combined high school and college instruction, but it also integrated innovative teaching methods. Rather than offering a structured, sequenced curriculum, DECA allowed each student to pursue interest-driven, teacher-guided learning experiences linked to state standards. Its assessment system assigned terms such as “proficient” or “mastery” instead of letter grades, and no set class periods defined the day.

Student Karlisa Smith

Early results from this pacesetting school were promising — strong student-teacher relationships developed, attendance soared to a remarkable 95 percent and 22 students successfully completed 33 college courses.

Dayton Early College Academy began its third year with ambitious goals, high expectations — and a sense that the clock was ticking.

But, like a child star reaching adolescence, DECA found that growing up in the public eye wasn’t easy. With students drawn from the state’s lowest-performing urban district, the school struggled to help students develop the skills and maturity they needed to succeed. Each new entering class created a need for additional staff and structure, resulting in a rapid, dramatic evolution from the early days of unfettered innovation. While grappling with these challenges, students and school leaders felt the constant pressure of public scrutiny — and an urgent need to prove the early college approach to funders, skeptics and the world at large.

So the Dayton Early College Academy began its third year in the fall of 2005 with ambitious goals, high expectations — and a sense that the clock was ticking.

YEAR THREE: GROWING UP UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

Teacher Kanika Jones works with student Mike Howard during morning advisory. DECA begins each day with time for individual instruction, academic counseling, and relationship building.

By Phil Neal

On a cold and blustery Friday morning in March, 16-year-old Karlisa Smith steps down from a city bus and trudges toward an office building on the edge of downtown Dayton. Inside, she takes the elevator to the third floor and makes her way down a long, gray-carpeted corridor past gray cubicle walls, still half asleep.

When she emerges into a large, open meeting area, the rock band is already warming up. Wailing guitars and thumping drumbeats barely register above the din of more than two hundred excited teenagers laughing, shouting and constantly moving. Any remnants of her early morning lethargy evaporate as Karlisa squeals and rushes to join her friends for a round of rapid-fire hugs, greetings and good-natured gossip. Twenty or so adults, many barely older than the kids, look on proudly, encouraging and joining in the revelry.

Moments later, a shriek of microphone feedback cuts through the general roar, and Principal Judy Hennessey, an energetic woman in a conservative suit, shouts down a few final power chords and welcomes everyone. For the students and staff of Dayton Early College Academy (DECA), another day of high school has officially begun.

This innovative public school doesn't open every day with student musicians jamming outside the main office, but the excitement and energy of this community meeting are hardly unusual. What is striking, in this age of overcrowded classrooms and comprehensive megaschools, is seeing the entire staff and student body gather comfortably in a space not much larger than the average McDonald's. Even more remarkable is the fact that so many seem thrilled to be here.

> **"My biggest goal is to go to college and finish, because no one in my family has gone to college without dropping out."**
>
> *— Karlisa Smith, student, in a journal entry*

Kanika Jones and her husband Marvin, also a teacher, enjoy working together at the school. "It's a sense of family here," Jones says.

Karlisa is one of those. "My biggest goal is to go to college and finish," she wrote in her journal during the first week of school, "because no one in my family has gone to college without dropping out."

Encouraging this ambition — and preparing students to realize it — is a key component of DECA's mission. It's also the reason students and teachers are willing to invest so much effort to create something unique in modern education.

In a struggling urban area where poverty, addiction and crime are commonplace, they're keeping standards high and hope alive among populations overlooked, underserved and often all but abandoned by traditional schools. They're involving families, engaging the community and steadily changing attitudes and expectations. They've earned national attention for their efforts since the school opened three years ago, but they're also still finding their way, struggling day by day to build an institution that will survive and thrive once the spotlight fades.

"I will have to make a lot of self-sacrifices to push myself in the right direction," Karlisa wrote in another early journal entry. She could easily be speaking for DECA as a whole. "I'm working too hard to turn back now."

Forging Relationships

After the community meeting, Karlisa heads to her first class. Kanika Jones, her adviser and science teacher, was a student herself not too many years ago. When classroom chatter turns to movies, hip-hop lyrics or other popular culture references, odds are Jones will be right there with the students, ready to offer an informed counterpoint of her own. She's an attractive woman with a dazzling array of hairstyles and a sophisticated fashion sense, both of which command attention while her wisdom and honesty earn students' respect.

All of these traits make it easy for students to relate to Jones and share concerns about school, family, work, relationships, future plans and anything else on their minds, but balancing accessibility and authority can be a challenge.

"A lot of them know that I'm young," Jones says, "so to give them back that separation, I presented it like the mommy role: No, I'm not your age. I've been to school. I'm married."

The strategy worked so well that the "mommy role" took on a life of its own. When someone asked whether she and her husband, Marvin, who teaches math at the school, planned to have kids someday, one student acted offended.

"You have kids already, Ms. Jones," he said. "We're right here."

"Oh, yes. You're right," she quickly reassured him. "I have grown people, yes. I have so many kids I wonder how I keep up. See, I got checked on that real quick."

Karlisa has no difficulty reconciling Jones' multiple roles.

"She's still an adult," she says, "but I look at her as one of my best friends. I'm really close to her, and I tell her just about everything. If you don't have a good relationship with your adviser, you don't have anything."

In her first year at DECA, Karlisa explains, she didn't have a strong connection with her adviser, which made it easy to lose focus and quickly fall behind.

"It was more like fun and games with me, because my adviser really wasn't on me," she says. Even so, she accepts sole responsibility for her situation. "You've got to do the work yourself. Your adviser can't just slap everything together that you've got and make it look like a scrapbook."

Jones inspires students like Karlisa to work hard, but there's still time for fun. She knows how to let classroom conversations develop and how to tie ideas that emerge during them back to course topics.

During a discussion on reflex

Student Brittany Gamble reflects on the school year at DECA's "I'm Going to College" wall of mirrors.

Students use technology such as laptop computers for coursework, research and presentations.

actions, one student mentions a time when an iron fell and burned her foot: “but it didn’t fall hard, so I didn’t know the iron was there until—“

“Hey, what’s smoking?” a boy interrupts.

When the laughter dies down, a few girls describe similar accidents.

“Wow, you guys do good work with irons,” another boy comments.

Jones shares a similar story about a childhood accident with an iron, then adds, “Now the other one’s when I caught a cactus.”

“You caught a cactus?” a girl asks. “You got — Ms. Jones!”

“’Cause I was little and I didn’t want the dirt to fall on the couch. I was just five then. My cousin was there playing Donkey Kong, and he just busts out laughing. He was your age. He was fifteen. So my aunt heard me crying and asked what’s wrong, and then I’m in the bathroom, and you would have paid to hear them taking out the needles. It was just like on TV.” She yelps three times and shakes her head.

“You were awful,” a boy says.

“No, she was a superwoman, trying to save everything,” a girl declares.

Without missing a beat, Jones turns the conversation back to biology, describing how growth and development differ from evolution. Everyone stays intent on her words.

Jones certainly didn’t include impromptu story-swapping in her lesson plan or set out to link lecture topics to real-life experiences, but DECA’s small class size and emphasis on relationships make such moments possible, even inevitable. Jones knows her students so well, and believes in their potential so strongly, that it’s hard not to discover personal connections and offer encouragement. She worked to establish those connections in traditional schools before coming to Dayton, but DECA’s program reinforces her approach and makes it possible — and a priority — for every teacher.

Managing Change

On the other side of the only full wall in Jones’ classroom, P.R. Frank is teaching Media Production. His small room is dimly lighted by a single halogen lamp and the glow of a dozen computer screens. Several students toil in tense concentration at their workstations, reviewing video footage or fine-tuning audio clips. Amid the blare of overlapping sound bites, one student with headphones taps out inaudible melodies on an electronic

Jones knows her students so well, and believes in their potential so strongly, that it's hard not to discover personal connections and offer encouragement.

keyboard, digitally capturing her original audio creations to mix into a soundtrack.

The last day of the academic quarter is also the deadline for the students' video projects, and most are painstakingly applying final touches. The projects represent the culmination of weeks or months of work, and they're required for participation in an upcoming field trip to New York City to attend the Tribeca Film Festival.

Frank is a distinctive figure, with short, white hair curling like cappuccino foam over a remarkably youthful face, thin beard and stylish, retro glasses. The contrast is striking, and Frank somehow looks equally natural in a shirt and tie or a T-shirt and jeans. He's a DECA original, one of the handful of teachers and administrators who helped design and launch the school three years ago over the course of just a few months.

"It was totally dreamy," Frank recalls, "a very sloppy start. By the first week of school, we hadn't decided what we were going to do."

The founders agreed that the school would be modeled on the Met school in Providence, Rhode Island. DECA would emphasize project-based learning driven by student interests, offer a highly individualized curriculum and maintain a very low student-teacher ratio. Textbooks, bells, grades, transcripts, sequenced classes and standardized testing would be banned. Instead, projects would incorporate a variety of state indicators, students would develop mastery in key areas and descriptive learning narratives would document the results qualitatively. The big picture was firmly in place, but few details — including where classes would take place on the University of Dayton campus — were in focus.

During that first, chaotic year, DECA's innovation and ambition earned national attention. Having such a high profile has helped in securing funding, gaining public support and buying time to experiment, but it has also raised the question of how — and

Teacher P.R. Frank (above). Jonathan Fauver (right) and Cory Williams (below) work on video projects during Frank's Media Production class.

when — those outside DECA will evaluate the school's impact.

"People have pinned a lot of hopes on us," Principal Judy Hennessey 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 feel huge pressure to do it almost while we're in our R&D phase. We don't have a window to fail."

Those watching DECA will note that a lot has changed in three years. The school now has a course schedule each quarter, gateways to measure student progress, and a greater emphasis on Ohio Graduation Test preparation and core academics.

"What you can do when you have 80 kids and a handful of teachers and no building," Hennessey explains, "is so different from what you can do with more than 300 kids and a much bigger staff."

The rapid changes have caused concern and generated conflict among the teachers. Some consider the additional structure beneficial, even vital. Others perceive a betrayal of the original vision for DECA. Many of the founding teachers have already left the school, frequently citing dissatisfaction with this shift from nearly limitless freedom to a hybrid approach incorporating many elements of traditional education. Those who remain often struggle with the ongoing transformation.

"This is a tough question for me," Frank admits. "I fully expected DECA to evolve since the first year. The mess we had then was a beautiful experiment in what a 14- or 15-year-old could do if the typical bounds were removed."

Now, in contrast, "I think it's easier," he says, "but I don't know if easy is necessarily the right thing. It's definitely easier for me as a teacher if I have organized classes, and I don't have to try to make all these connections. I don't know if it's the best thing, because we started out trying to create something different from a regular high school where you sit in classes all day and earn credits."

Teacher Kanika Jones discusses an upcoming gateway presentation with Karlisa Smith.

Demonstrating Results

In early March, Karlisa waits anxiously for her gateway conference to begin. Because DECA allows students to progress at their own pace, this review of her academic and personal achievements is akin to a final exam. Her mother is on her way to school, Jones is gathering paperwork and working with other advisees, and Karlisa's friends are trying to boost her confidence.

She shouldn't be nervous about speaking in front of the group, one boy says. "She's the loudest person in the school."

"No, I'm not," Karlisa immediately responds. "I'm like second or third."

"Do you want me to come to your gateway?" another friend asks.

"No," Karlisa tells her. "I'm scared."

"Well, I'm going to come anyway."

Karlisa smiles and smooths the pleated skirt of her fashionable gray suit. Students are encouraged to wear professional attire for gateways, exhibitions, job shadows, internships and similar activities. Opportunities to practice public speaking are plentiful at DECA, as are chances to interact with members of the community such as business leaders and elected officials. This year alone, DECA has played host to state legislators, college presidents, Ohio Department of Education officials, a reporter from *Business Week*, researchers from Harvard, and Governor Bob Taft, among others.

This morning, though, Karlisa will have to address an audience of only her teachers and peers. Jones is nearly

> **"What I really like about the school is it holds the student accountable."**
>
> *— Kanika Jones, teacher*

as excited about the gateway as her student is.

"What I really like about the school is it holds the student accountable," she says, "allowing them to explain, when they do their gateways, why they should have the right to pass, where in a traditional setting you could pass them with a D and it's the next teacher's problem."

When Karlisa's mother arrives, Jones welcomes her and invites her into a small conference room along with another teacher and several students. At the front of the room, Karlisa looks poised and confident. For each gateway requirement she shows a slide listing her achievements and explains how she met the appropriate standards.

Attendance — she was absent just three times. Exhibition — she gave a presentation about TV, video games and youth violence. Self-discernment — she has focused on listening carefully to others. Family participation — Jones and Karlisa's parents have talked frequently about her progress.

For her gateway Karlisa also had to read a book not assigned for class, keep up with her journal entries, use a day planner consistently, take an academic skills test, prepare for the OGT, and perform community service. The toughest requirement, however, was achieving an academic percentage of 75 percent. After her missteps and lack of focus last year, Karlisa's percentage was barely above 40 percent.

"Bringing up my percentage was so hard," Karlisa says, "digging myself out of that hole, because that was very, very deep."

When Jones announces that Karlisa has officially passed her gateway, the room fills with applause.

"I have noticed a tremendous, tremendous improvement in you from the beginning of the year to now," Jones tells Karlisa. "You're going to be one of my examples. 'Cause we both know where your percentage was at the start. How does it feel now that you're a success story, knowing you did this on your own? I mean, I assisted you, but I feel like I can't help those who don't help themselves. And I saw that you were really trying to get something done."

She follows the praise with a pointed question: "What are you going to do now not to stay at this mark? So many people get complacent and skip into that chill mode."

Karlisa is already prepared with a new set of goals. She'll continue to work hard and plans to schedule her second exhibition and gateway for May, or over the summer at the latest.

Karlisa's friend raises her hand shyly, then says, "I just want to say to Ms. Jones, you have been doing so good with your children, and they have been passing their gateways, and can you put me in your advisory?"

Student Louise Barr has high hopes.

Jones chuckles. "We're doing some cleaning," she says, "so there will probably be some room."

"That means the kids like you, don't they?" Karlisa's mother asks. "It shows you how they appreciate you."

Again, Jones is quick to direct credit to the students. They're the ones who do the hard work, she says.

"I told them, 'You are in high school. It's at the point now where you are about to be a grown adult. You cannot be pulled by your hair.' I love for them to see the light on their own. I love for them to say, 'Man, I did this.'"

Addressing Conflict

On the first Saturday of spring break, the day after the morning concert, P.R. Frank sends an e-mail to the faculty that reads, "I must say one of my DECA dreams came true Friday. The community meeting truly felt like a community."

Three weeks later, he realizes his second longstanding dream for the school when the first DECA student film festival takes place. Ten of his students present their video projects in the University of Dayton student union's Boll Theater, but because the festival occurs on the first evening of Easter break, attendance is minimal.

The following week, Frank learns the theater will be available on Wednesday afternoon. With Hennessey's approval, he sends an e-mail on Tuesday at 9 P.M. asking teachers to release students from afternoon classes the next day to attend a second presentation of the film festival. He apologizes for the disruption and last-minute notice, citing the importance of celebrating his students' hard work and raising funds for the upcoming trip.

On Wednesday morning, many of his colleagues are not happy to learn they'll be losing class time to yet another interruption. The students seem to enjoy the film festival, and the fund-raiser is successful, but Frank and Hennessey field numerous complaints.

"The teachers were furious," she admits. "I really should have said no."

Elton Griffith, a history teacher, was frustrated by the disruption. Griffith believes students deserve to be held to high expectations, and that consistent, rigorous standards can help prepare them for success despite racism, poverty, addiction, abuse and the other overwhelming challenges many face.

"The quality of life these kids can have if they become the DECA dream is significant," he says. "The effect that this school could have on the community could be ridiculously great — a bunch of people who pay taxes and have legal jobs, who are mentors within the community, who understand the privilege of doing community service…"

In Griffith's opinion, the best way to realize this amazing potential is through an intense focus on academics. "I want kids to understand that the fifty minutes they have with me are sacred," he says, "and I am not going to waste them."

As a fellow founding teacher, he has worked alongside Frank since before the school opened, but the two often have very different ideas about DECA's mission and future.

"Every couple of months we have a new conflict, a new dilemma," Griffith says of Frank. "He thinks he's keeping the vision alive, and I think the original mentality did nothing, because we didn't teach kids anything for six months. How can problem-based learning work if kids can't spell the

Teacher Marvin Jones works with a small group of students.

word 'problem'?

"There are definitely positive changes happening," Griffith says of DECA's evolution, "but we still have staff members who don't understand how powerful poverty is."

Moving Forward

At DECA, the end of the school year comes suddenly, but with few surprises. The hot, humid southwest Ohio spring is mercifully mild, and students and teachers are celebrating their achievements and preparing for new challenges.

Kanika Jones, for one, has plenty to occupy her besides school. The unofficial DECA mom will soon become a real one. She and Mr. Jones are expecting the arrival in September of their first baby, a girl they've decided to name Kaitlynn Moriah Jones.

> **"I want kids to understand that the fifty minutes they have with me are sacred, and I am not going to waste them."**
>
> *— Elton Griffith, teacher*

Jones' other "children" have been gracious about the coming competition, though some are clearly concerned about her not having as much time for them. When Jones returns to school after her free period on a day late in May, the issue finally comes to the surface. Karlisa, looking worried, tells Jones that a girl in their advisory is really upset. She's been crying and has shut herself in a conference room.

Jones hurries to the room, wondering what has happened, but through the window she sees the girl with a big grin on her face. When she opens the door, shouts of "Surprise!" make her jump. Waiting inside are her husband, her advisees and a table with sandwiches, drinks, a sheet cake and gifts. Karlisa has planned a baby shower, enlisting the other kids and Mr. Jones to help.

Teacher Elton Griffith displays a dream catcher students and teachers made during DECA's first year.

"The whole question of what makes [DECA] work," Jones says in a moment of reflection, "that's still a question I think that people are trying to answer. I know for me, as far as what we have to do, it's a sense of family here."

Gestures such as the baby shower reinforce Jones' decision to return in the fall. She'll have a month or so to get her classes started before the baby is due. Her maternity leave will likely extend through winter break, but she'll be back in January, ready to teach, mother and share stories until all her children are doing their very best.

Frank is optimistic about the coming year as well. He has a new strategy to keep individualized learning alive while supporting a more rigid school structure. Media Production will become a practical, drop-in workshop where students can work on exhibitions or other projects, rather than a quarterly course anyone can take without a concrete goal.

"In every iteration of DECA," Frank says, "I try to make sure the original vision is possible, where if somebody wants to pursue something individually, if someone has a really strong interest and we can tie curriculum to it, we can allow that. I keep that small candle burning in my room with the hope that its value is noted, broadcast, celebrated and reproduced. That's what is keeping me there right now. I love it."

He has high hopes for a new first-year academy, an intensive program for entering students that will focus on core academics, test preparation and the skills needed to succeed at DECA and in college.

Once students are grounded in these basics, he says, "we're still open to kids who want to go beyond that. Kids who are motivated. We're not locked into a traditional approach. In a lot of respects, that's a good way to go."

Principal Judy Hennessey

Griffith will be one of four teachers running the academy. He and the other faculty members consider the role a perfect fit. At the final staff meeting of the year, several good-natured jokes revolve around the idea that if the new kids can survive a year with Griffith and other especially strict teachers, they'll be prepared for the demands of DECA like no students before them. Disagreements will surely arise again, but for now, Frank and Griffith are both excited about the coming year.

"It's just ideological differences," Griffith says of their occasional conflicts. "There's a place for both of us here."

Hennessey agrees. She was instrumental in naming Griffith DECA Teacher of the Year for 2006-07, in part because the two share similar views on topics such as discipline and accountability.

On the other hand, she and Frank "agree on almost nothing in terms of pedagogy," she admits, but "I really value him on the faculty, because he brings that divergence, causes us to step back. Because he is more a friend to kids, he has great insight. Kids love him.

"Does he bring a different way of looking at the complexity? Absolutely. Has he brought solutions? Absolutely."

Hennessey will be back next year, resisting the allure of grandchildren in Boston and the retirement she left to come to DECA. The workload involved "is not for the faint of heart," she says, "but I'm inspired by these kids, and I'm inspired by this faculty."

She is also staying because she considers DECA's difficult, draining work vitally important.

"If early college and small schools fail," she says, "I don't know what's in the wings, except a more polarized education system. We clearly have 'haves' and 'have-nots' right now. What's happening in private schooling, and in upper-income suburban schooling, is light years different from what I see happening in urban [environments]. We are in two universes."

She often tells students, "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."

Karlisa Smith's indicators have slipped since her gateway in March, but they're still relatively strong. Her progress and determination this year have impressed her teachers, who selected her for special recognition at a student award ceremony. They designated her one of four Up and Coming Students of the Year.

> **"I'm inspired by these kids, and I'm inspired by this faculty."**
>
> *— Judy Hennessey, principal*

She's working part time at a restaurant, planning to buckle down on schoolwork and take the OGT practice exam over the summer, and is on track to pass another gateway before school resumes in the fall. In addition to working on her remaining gateways next year, Karlisa is eager to take her first college courses.

"I'm going to pass," she says of the OGT and her gateway, and a summer of hard work is just one more worthwhile sacrifice on the path to her ultimate goals: "I'm going to graduate on time. I'm determined to go to college."

About the storyteller

Phil Neal is a freelance writer and editor whose clients include several Fortune 50 companies, as well as leaders in the healthcare, education and nonprofit sectors. He lives in Dayton with his wife, son, and feline office staff and can be reached via www.textwell.com.

EVERY STUDENT DESERVES A LEGACY
2006

This book is dedicated to the thousands of teachers, students, parents, school leaders and community members working to improve education. For every story we've told of courage and commitment, of difficult times and hard-won progress, hundreds more remain untold. By sharing the struggles, frustrations and triumphs of these few, we pay tribute to all who work for change in our schools.

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