

*"At Early College, we have the chance to make a real difference in kids' lives."*

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## A Different School of Thought

The first three years in the life of an innovative school that blends high school and college

**Toledo Early  
College High School**

Toledo, Ohio

# Early College High Schools

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Toledo Early College High School

*This is the story of how concepts of education reform inspired a frustrated group of experienced teachers and administrators to create an innovative public high school on the University of Toledo's Scott Park Campus. The narrative begins in conflict between teachers at Woodward High School and extends to a contentious meeting of influential leaders. Ultimately, the account poses the question of whether average 14-year-olds can be prepared through an innovative and demanding curriculum to become college students by their junior year in high school.*

*Although dozens of people share responsibility for creating this unique school, this story focuses on the efforts of a few individuals who represent a large group of dreamers, risk-takers and hardheaded pragmatists who helped shape Toledo Early College High School.*



**Chakiera Tipton shares valuable research material with Iesha Hickman in Randy Nissen's class**

# A Different School of Thought

The first three years in the life of an innovative school that blends high school and college

By Larry Levy

May 2003: A School Divided

**T**he placid exterior of Woodward High School, an 80-year-old architectural jewel, hides the bitter argument that has split its faculty into two camps. On one side, a dozen well-respected teachers, referred to by some parents as “the foundation of our community,” are fighting to defend time-honored teaching practices. These coaches, department heads and veteran teachers are critical of a proposal to divide the school’s 1,000 students into three small schools that would offer more individual attention, project-based learning and lessons that link course content to personal experience.

The group gathers in the teachers’ lounge to debate the proposal’s pros and cons. They discuss the plan’s call for teachers to become more hands-on and personally involved in their students’ work. They talk over its push for cross-curricular lesson plans, which challenges the decades-old practice of maintaining separate academic departments.

As a colleague later recounts, the teachers are uncomfortable with what founders of the approach call the “new three R’s”: rigor, relevance and relationships.

“The lessons of history and literature are timeless,” one teacher asserts. “Relevance is just a fad word for babying kids who don’t want to work. With papers and tests to grade, who has time to spoon feed kids who aren’t doing their homework?”

“Why fix something that’s not broken?” another teacher says. “I’ve worked hard to



*"I dream that some day, people will speak of this school with great respect."*

– Randy Nissen

develop challenging coursework I can repeat from one year to the next. By knowing which worksheet I'll be using on a specific day in April, I'm free to concentrate on practicing my lectures."

Up one flight of stairs and down the hall from this group, a second team of Woodward teachers discusses the same issues.

"Worksheets are the problem," social studies teacher Randy Nissen says to a group of reform-minded teachers. "How do worksheets help kids think independently and find creative solutions to problems? How do they get students excited about learning?"

Five colleagues, part of the faction that has been mocked by less supportive colleagues as "The Young Visionaries," are gathered in Nissen's spacious classroom. Room 335 – where the walls are covered in a mix of posters that ranges from Bob Marley to Bob Dylan to Martin Luther King Jr. – is a short distance from the teachers' lounge meeting, but it may as well be across a continent for the differences in attitude.

Nissen isn't surprised when science teacher Tim Bollin echoes his concerns about worksheets. He's seen how Bollin creates projects to challenge his students and engage their curiosity. One day, Bollin has students building model factories to demonstrate parallels between cell structure and social systems. Another day, they're measuring scaled distances between planets.

"Basing class work on fill-in-the-blanks handouts isn't preparing these kids for college or jobs any more than a paint-by-numbers kit teaches art," Bollin says. Counselor Sarah Barman and English teachers Meighan Richardson and Dick Hoffman nod in agreement.

Nissen, a deceptively laid-back showman with a passionate commitment to inspiring his students, also nods. For him, bringing lessons alive is what relevance in education is all about.



**Science teacher Tim Bollin discusses plans to plant an open field on the University of Toledo's Scott Park campus with native prairie grasses as part of an outdoor laboratory project that has been funded by a large grant from Lowe's Corporation.**

**A**fter teaching for 19 years, Randy Nissen doesn't think that being called "young" is much of an insult. As he's spent his career searching for effective ways to reach his students, he accepts the sarcastic label of "visionary" as a badge of honor.

Despite strong opposition from influential teachers, this is an exciting time for Nissen and his colleagues. They've done their homework in evaluating their own best practices and seeking alternative models for secondary education. It is clear to them that the current high school system isn't working for the majority of urban kids. In 2003, Woodward is ranked by the state as being in academic

emergency, the lowest ranking.

It comes down to this, Nissen has decided. Because Toledo Public Schools' college prep curriculum assumes that only a small percentage of Woodward's students are college bound, most are sent into the world without a clear career path or job skills. No wonder so many kids are alienated by high school lessons that fail to draw connections with real-life experience. It's not surprising that half of incoming freshmen drop out before graduation. When Nissen is frustrated, as he is now, he stands up from his desk, runs his fingers through his graying hair and gestures as he speaks.

On any given day, half of Nissen's students could be absent because they

"students are alienated by lessons that fail to draw connections with real-life experience"

– Tim Bollin

aren't motivated to attend school. One year, his students' absences totaled more than 6,000 days. How is continuity possible when students disappear for weeks at a time and then return without notice or excuse? Nissen is forced to teach stand-alone lessons that don't require students to conduct outside research. Adding to this frustration are kids with strong attendance records who never do *anything* that's assigned. Often they show up for class without textbook, pencil or paper. In a system that Nissen calls "educational triage," he's forced to meet kids where they are on a given day – patiently repeating past instructions and accepting the limits of what he can offer.

While Nissen gazes out the broad windows of his late-afternoon classroom, he wonders how anyone who cares about the future of Woodward students can accept this situation. If he didn't look too closely at the calm neighborhood scene, he might miss seeing bars on the windows of the small homes just across the street or forget the boarded-up businesses only a block away. It's hard to know which problems at Woodward are symptoms of its neighborhood's poverty, but he refuses to use them as an excuse for complacency.

Over the two decades since he gave up his small trucking business to become a teacher, Nissen has "never once regretted the decision." He remembers clearly the late night he was hauling a load on the Indiana Toll Road midway between Toledo and Chicago – guzzling rest stop coffee, pulling over for short naps and

cranking rhythm and blues to keep awake. The revelation that he should spend the rest of his life as a teacher came to him so clearly that night that he enrolled in graduate school as soon as he returned home.

Once in the classroom, Nissen found he liked the way teaching engages his full intellectual energy and enjoyed broadening the experiences of kids from narrow backgrounds. Now he is convinced that the small schools initiative from KnowledgeWorks Foundation will bring changes that can reach more students.

The teachers' union has said that 75



**April Rios is the kind of student who could get lost in a large high school. Instead, Toledo Early College High School gave her the chance to become the first in her family to attend college.**

percent of teachers must support the proposal before it can be enacted. Although it's a tough challenge to build such support, it makes sense to Nissen because the changes will demand a strong team effort and much hard work by the entire staff. If a large majority of staff doesn't support the changes, they won't be implemented properly.

The campaign to win the hearts and minds of Woodward's teachers is a living example of the participatory democracy that Nissen has taught as classroom theory. It's exciting for him to see students paying attention to the staff debate and taking sides. However, after avoiding divisive politics throughout his career, Nissen isn't entirely comfortable in his role as a leader in the reform movement. His touchstone routines of classroom, coffee, lunch breaks and professional development have been disrupted. Amiable relationships he's enjoyed with colleagues have been broken.

The debate becomes more heated as voting day approaches. Teachers seem to be fighting for their professional lives as they argue the merits of supporting the present system or radically restructuring it. The status quo side blames school problems on students who lack discipline and academic preparation. The reform team believes creative solutions can win back the attention of disaffected students.

Exhausted by faculty infighting, Nissen wonders whether the reform that he's invested so much time and emotion into can succeed. As the time for a vote draws near, the outcome is too close to call.



**Tim Bollin encourages student Shaina Nelson as she seeks direction for completing her year-end science project.**

On the day of the vote, Nissen sits alone in his classroom grading responses to a Great Depression quiz. When the wait becomes unbearable, he puts aside his papers and walks down Woodward's broad stairway to the first floor.

Well before he reaches the office, however, Nissen can read the outcome in the reaction of teachers behind a glass wall, and he stops short to gawk. Whooping, laughing, shaking hands and cheering, the opposition leaders are celebrating what will turn out to be a narrow victory. Their 30 percent of the vote is enough to stop the majority from enacting the proposed reform.

Nissen's first reaction is gut-wrenching disappointment. He turns away and bows his head. Then he feels relief that the tense fight is over. He tells himself that he will fulfill his commitment to teaching Woodward students the best way he knows how. Later the blow is reinforced when he learns that two other Toledo high

schools, Libbey and Scott, are moving ahead with the small school reform.

But the experience of fighting for reform has changed Nissen. Once content with his daily routines and narrow classroom focus, now he will look for a more hospitable place to implement new ideas.

### Fall 2004: An Unlikely Partnership

While Randy Nissen is occupied during autumn 2004 with Woodward's attempt to recover from its bitter conflict, other educators within Toledo Public Schools are working to address the very problems that motivated Nissen and his team. But one partnership that will prove vital to the district's move toward alternative teaching models is getting off to a shaky start.

New University of Toledo President Dan Johnson and Toledo Public Schools (TPS) Superintendent Eugene Sanders meet for the first time outside a café. Only minutes after their first handshake, Sanders angrily accuses Johnson's

institution of damaging public education.

"The charter schools you sponsor are draining thousands of students and millions of dollars from an already-stressed situation," Sanders asserts. "Yet these schools fail to provide kids any tangible advantages."

Johnson steps back toward the heavy noontime traffic of Secor Road. As a newcomer to Toledo, he doesn't know that the university has set itself up in competition with TPS. Aware that Sanders has the reputation of being a savvy politician who avoids such tirades, Johnson takes the charges seriously. But before Johnson can say anything, Sanders turns his back on their lunch meeting and tromps across the parking lot to his car.

Over his long academic career, Johnson has established a national reputation for forging partnerships between urban universities and local institutions. But during "ten minutes of getting my ear chewed off," Johnson learns that Toledo presents challenges he hasn't faced elsewhere. He has already heard that Toledo's corporate and public institutions



**In Toledo Early College's first year, principal Val Napieralski encouraged the innovative cross-curricular lesson plans that teachers Randy Nissen and Paulette Dewey improvised on a day-to-day basis.**

are suspicious of each other and reluctant to share resources. Johnson, however, isn't intimidated by the challenge of Toledo's fragmented business climate.

And far from being discouraged by the unexpected confrontation, Johnson is impressed by Sanders as a passionate leader, an articulate spokesman and a committed advocate for quality education. Johnson hopes that by demonstrating his commitment to supporting TPS he can repair the damaged relationship.

Over the next year, the two men meet regularly to discuss common challenges. The rancor of their first meeting is forgotten as their collaboration deepens into personal friendship and a shared vision of helping Toledo become an active player in the global business community by improving its educational offerings.

Weeks after their first meeting, in the paneled conference room of the University's Faculty Club, during a working lunch over Chef Diane's chicken salad and potato chips, Johnson and Sanders talk about Toledo Public Schools' failure to remedy its low test scores and soaring dropout rate.

During the work with KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Sanders has learned about an innovative education model that sounds promising. Dayton Public Schools and the University of Dayton have partnered to launch a new high school that is sending its students to classes on the university's campus. Sanders explains the concept: average students with at-risk factors, but without behavioral problems, are selected for the new high school. Most are the first in their families to attend college; their numbers include students who have not done particularly well in junior high or who come from impoverished backgrounds. By most definitions, they would not be considered college material.

These students are taught according to a small schools model that prepares them to begin college classes as early as their second high school semester. After four years of rigorous studies, previously average students – with little hope of attending college – can earn up to two years of college credit along with high school diplomas.

Maybe that experiment could serve as an example for future programs in Toledo. "A program like this has the potential for increasing graduation rates, keeping students in the TPS system and bringing hundreds of new students onto the university campus," Sanders explains.

Johnson is intrigued by the possibility that it could support his promise to reach out to the community and attract students who have been choosing community colleges over universities, a growing trend.

The two men readily agree to establish a committee to investigate Dayton's experiment and a potential grant from KnowledgeWorks Foundation.



**D**uring the months that Johnson and Sanders develop their plans, Nissen sees Woodward's faculty relations return to strained normalcy, although he often feels like school conditions are getting worse. Now, a police officer sits by the main door

to keep order. One morning, Nissen's class is interrupted by two boys beating on each other in the hallway. As the boys curse and trade punches inside a ring of excited kids, Nissen dials every administrator's extension in his school directory and gets no response. When the fight eventually ends by itself, it's nearly impossible to bring his class's attention back to the Treaty of Versailles.

Counselor Sarah Barman remembers seeing Nissen during this time. "No matter how discouraged he must have been... he was constantly full of energy and always doing extra things like coaching the Quiz Bowl team or

introducing his students to cultural events, often at his own expense. His smile was infectious whenever he talked about finding new ways to teach the kids."

The associations Nissen has formed with the other advocates for change are important to him. He admires the research and hard work Meighan Richardson and Tim Bollin put into researching alternatives for Woodward and finds the innovative, cross-curricular classes he develops with Dick Hoffman especially satisfying.

Calling themselves Team 10, Hoffman and Nissen use their parallel schedules of sophomore classes to teach historic eras such as World War I and the Cold War

through a multidimensional approach that combines history with literature, art and music. Leveraging their back-to-back classes, they can trade classrooms, bring their students together, expand or contract discussion time and take their kids to the Toledo Art Museum for field trips.

Their efforts are eventually halted when other teachers complain the Team 10 approach is unfair because they don't have the same scheduling opportunity. Even so, the experience gives Nissen a feel for how collaboration can work – and its curtailment leaves him even more restless than before.

*A new high school model sounded promising. Average students who would not be considered college material would begin college classes as early as their second high school semester.*



**Teachers Randy Nissen and Tim Bollin continued looking for ways to re-energize learning even after a proposed reform at their school failed. That quest eventually led them to TECHS.**

"Students will learn about the life and culture that goes along with a university education."

– Dan Johnson



**Principal Val Napieralski's down-to-earth style and infectious enthusiasm energized the team during the school's early days.**

teachers and union representatives cooperate to an unusual degree with university liaison Wendell McConnaha to prepare a model for the new school.

John Foley, who doesn't know he is destined to succeed Sanders within two years, has a quiet and cautious demeanor that masks an inner toughness and ardor for studying innovations. He and Jan Kilbride, a former high school principal with a reputation for efficiency and thoughtfulness, decide that staff will be crucial to the success of the school they are already calling Toledo Early College High School. If they are to have a chance of preparing average students to take college classes during high school, they will need gifted teachers who can relate to kids and embrace new ways of teaching. Even as Foley, Kilbride and others prepare a budget for an impending grant application deadline, they begin scouting for a principal.

Within days they agree on Val Napieralski. After 30 years of working in

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**M**eanwhile, the idea for an early college high school is gathering momentum. Perhaps it's the shared optimism of Gene Sanders and Dan Johnson that drives the investigating committee to become an effective team soon after its formation. As Sanders asserts "we can do this," TPS administrators,

Toledo Public Schools, the Bowsher High School principal has proven adept at getting students to attend at a higher-than-average rate while controlling the discipline problems that plague other large inner-city schools. A committee of representatives from the district's human resources department, the teachers' union and administration confirms her selection.

When Kilbride offers the opportunity to Napieralski, she does a high-power selling job. As Napieralski says, "I've always respected Jan's judgment and knew she'd have done a lot of research before offering this to me with such enthusiasm. I liked the way she explained the early college concept and how it fit in with the investigation I'd done on the potential for small schools."

Napieralski agrees on the spot to serve as the school's first principal.

Later, Kilbride will explain TPS' support of early college. "We acknowledged our problems and were already looking for educational models to serve kids better. The charter schools weren't the best answer for us, but they showed us some possibilities. We wanted to support the kids in their need to prepare for college and show them they could find a way to pay for it."

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**A**s the necessary elements for the new school come together, another key player is unaware that he is about to join the project.

Dennis Lettman paces back and forth across the linoleum floor of a hospital waiting room and ignores an intrusive television broadcast. He's too concerned about his wife's recovery from a medical



**Dennis Lettman, dean of students at the University of Toledo’s Scott Park campus, explains to a group of visitors how he became an advocate of the early college high school.**

procedure to pay much attention to a local news report. But then he hears something that forces his attention. Lettman’s boss at the University of Toledo, Dan Johnson, is standing beside Toledo Public Schools’ Gene Sanders. They’re talking about creating a new high school on the university’s Scott Park campus where Lettman is dean of students.

“By being part of the campus, students will learn about the life and culture that goes along with a university education,” Johnson says. “One hundred high school freshmen will comprise the first class that’s scheduled to begin in August.”

Although Lettman is generally known for keeping a cool head when others are freaking out, he is reeling. Are Sanders and Johnson out of their minds? How are they going to house an entire high school in the already crowded building? How will they provide bathrooms, classrooms and lockers? Where’s the cafeteria going to be? He clenches his hands into tight fists while he stares hard at the two smiling men in coats and ties.

Lettman will remember the resentment he felt that day and how chaotic he thought the project would turn out. As a licensed counselor, he is sure that sending 14-year-olds into college classes is a disaster waiting to happen.

### Spring 2005: A Team Comes Together

In late May, Randy Nissen reads a memo inviting teachers to an informational meeting about the new Toledo Early College High School. After so many conflicts at Woodward, this program seems like the answer to a prayer, but Nissen has had his hopes quashed too often to allow himself much emotion.

“Have you seen this?” he asks Tim Bollin and Paulette Dewey, a veteran English teacher who visits the school to supervise its intern program.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure what I think about it.” Bollin’s skeptical tone matches Nissen’s attitude.

“I’m at least going to the meeting.”

Dewey tells them. Over the past year she’s joined the men’s discussion of school reform and generally shared their views. “I’ve done about everything there is to do in teaching, and I’m close to retirement,” she says, “but this opportunity might just be too attractive to pass up.”

Nissen shrugs and exchanges a casual look of “why not?” with Bollin, but he has strong hopes that Toledo Early College will be every bit as interesting as it promises.



His initial skepticism has waned, but Dennis Lettman still wants to know how Toledo Early College High School will function day to day. At Johnson’s suggestion, he drives 150 miles down Interstate 75 to investigate Dayton Early College Academy, the state’s first early college high school.

Under Gothic archways and across college quads on the University of Dayton campus, Lettman is pleasantly surprised to see teenagers walking unnoticed among



**Teacher Randy Nissen, working with Mercedes Nunez, calls himself a cheerleader for the early college model. “It’s the relationships among teachers and students that makes Toledo Early College so successful,” he says.**

traditional college students. The chaos he expected isn’t evident anywhere. He is further impressed by an innovative college preparatory curriculum that demands hard work and maturity from its students and refuses to accept stereotypes of what at-risk kids can accomplish.

On Lettman’s drive home, he reconsiders the mission that Johnson has given him. Lettman is beginning to think that maybe, but only maybe, this program could work. But who is going to put it together over the next three months?

this woman filled with positive energy who didn’t seem discouraged by the challenge of opening a school in three months when nothing was in place: no classrooms, students, curriculum, staff, policies or procedures. I didn’t know how it would happen, but we made a good team from the first meeting. Val understood the intricacies of creating a high school, and I knew how to direct the university’s resources. She had me believing it was possible.”

On an early May morning, Toledo Early College’s new principal, Val Napieralski, enters Lettman’s office, a space decorated in file cabinets, towering paper stacks and family photos. Very quickly, Lettman realizes that this woman with the easy laugh, down-to-earth approach and whirlwind energy level will be a great partner. It’s not that she minimizes the challenge; she’s very forthright in accepting it. Rather, her organized task list and clear commitment to the school draw Lettman in. Napieralski impresses Lettman with her combination of practical teaching knowledge and her experience as principal of Bowsher, a Toledo Public Schools urban high school.

“We simply hit it off from the get-go,” Lettman says. “Here was

A week later, Nissen is among 15 curious teachers listening to Napieralski describe Toledo Early College. She explains that 100 students have been selected for the new school through parent meetings, questionnaires and personal interviews. She’s a sincere advocate of the program, but Nissen is impressed when she says that the school’s personality will reflect the talents of its first staff.

“We’re going to open the doors in August after a week of orientation activities,” she adds. “And then we’ll work as a team to make it work.”

Despite his apprehension about having enough time to be prepared by August, Nissen is motivated by the chance to create a permanent structure that could influence future generations of Toledo students – and he’s excited by a new beginning to his teaching career. The chance for team teaching, weekly planning time and flexibility in lessons is the opportunity he has been waiting for.

On a spring day, warm enough for Nissen to open the large windows in his classroom and feel the damp breeze that will stir his already restless class to distraction, Nissen is teaching a social studies lesson about the Vietnam War. When a girl he doesn’t know enters his classroom, Nissen is annoyed by the interruption of a discussion that was only just beginning to elicit responses. He gives the girl a disapproving look and waits for her to say something.

“What is it?” Nissen says, and the girl crosses the room to hand over a pink phone message.

“Congratulations,” is all the note says. “From Val.”

Through this quiet exchange, Nissen has been invited to take a new job that will radically alter his professional career and make demands on his personal life.

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Later that evening, Nissen stands in his kitchen with his Woodward colleague Tim Bollin and Paul Tierney, a close friend who teaches math at Bowsher. The three of them will become the first teaching staff at Toledo Early College, along with Paulette Dewey, who has agreed to put aside her retirement plans to help establish the school's English department.

Nissen knows the risks of abandoning his seniority in a secure job for a venture that's based on a three-year start-up grant, but in this moment – flanked by two friends on a spring night in his own kitchen, a simmering pot of chili on the stove behind them – Nissen smiles broadly as the three of them hold up bottles of good pale ale towards the ceiling lamp.

“Here’s to our first faculty meeting.”

“Here, here,” the others say – and clang their bottles together.

### July 2005: The Dirty Work

Randy Nissen likes coming to work in the summer wearing shorts, a T-shirt and sandals. It doesn't feel like work when he crosses the broad lawn of the Scott Park campus.

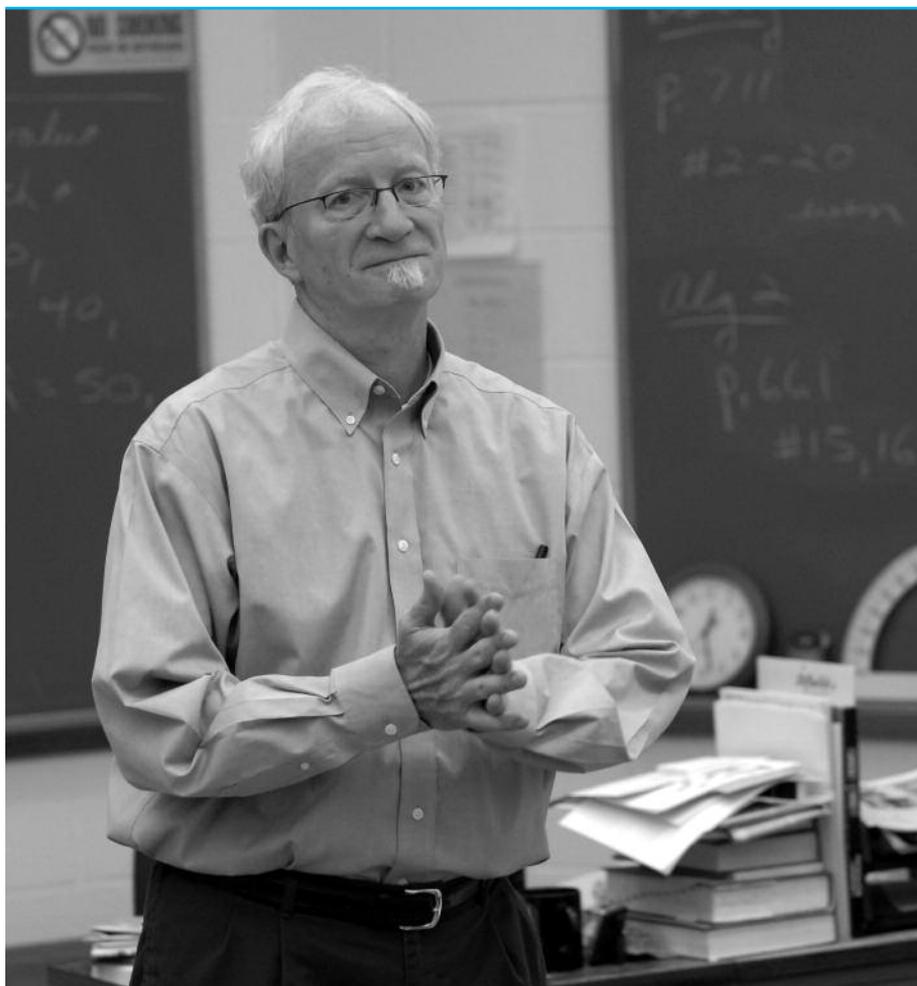
Constructed of rectangular planes of tan brick and smoked glass, Scott Park's buildings appear cold and institutional in comparison to its 160-acre, park-like setting. Views of campus from the glass-lined corridor that leads to the new Early College High School, however, are quiet and pastoral, much nicer than the building's cold exterior.

On the other hand, Nissen's new classroom doesn't measure up to its surroundings. Its former tenants left it with a dirty floor, littered papers, junk piled in the corners. The classroom is as large as the space Nissen occupied at Woodward, but it's lacking the beautiful stained-wood cubbies and glass cabinets. When Tim Bollin comes in, they commiserate.

“There isn't storage in any of these rooms,” Bollin says. “But since I have to teach biology without lab equipment or computers, it's just another thing we'll have to be creative about.” It will be more than a year before TPS releases budgeted money for these items.

Unwilling to wait for Dennis Lettman to sort out the janitorial arrangement for the new school, Nissen, Napieralski, Tierney, Dewey and Bollin commence their new professional life by scrubbing its office and classrooms with cleaning supplies they've brought from home. Somehow it's fitting that from the beginning, TECH's staff has to roll up its sleeves to perform tasks that would have been done for them at more traditional schools.

*Nissen, Napieralski, Tierney, Dewey and Bollin commence their new professional life by scrubbing classrooms with cleaning supplies they've brought from home.*



**Math teacher Paul Tierney, one of four original teachers at TECHS, organized a chess team as they worked to build a school culture in the school's first year.**

### August 22, 2005: The Doors Open

No ivy-covered carillon tower broadcasts *The Sound of Music* over the Scott Park neighborhood as it does across the genteel streets surrounding the main campus. Two boys in stocking caps blast hip-hop music loud enough to shake and rattle their rusted Caprice. An older student wearing a green beret blows cigar clouds from a mirror-polished Monte Carlo perched on spinning wheel rims. Waves of students debark from public buses to rush for class.

For at least this first day of school, Randy Nissen's students are intimidated

and quiet. Maybe they're just tired after long bus rides through the city – far from their junior high friends and neighborhoods. When Nissen and Paulette Dewey present their first assignment, their combined class is surprisingly subdued.

"We want you to interview someone that you don't know yet and write a character sketch," Dewey says. She moves constantly when she speaks and seems to carve words with elaborate hand movements. As she paces across the room, she looks into the eyes of her students to hold their attention. "You'll have to conduct interviews to get the information you need."

The students listen carefully to this woman who speaks with such energy and confidence. After a discussion about background influences and the ways personality can be defined, the students get to work.

"Last year I could just read my social studies book at home and sleep through class," a girl says. "The whole first week all we did was sign out our books and fill out registration cards." She twists an intricate hair braid and plans how she'll tackle the assignment.

Like many others at Early College High School, this girl is here because her parents said it would be "a great opportunity." She's surprised at what she'll have to do to earn that opportunity. In addition to course content, she'll be responsible for passing "gateways" that include portfolios of work, service hours and a multi-genre research project to be presented to the entire school. Somehow her new teachers make this challenge seem possible. Ms. Dewey speaks without hesitation, and Mr. Nissen actually smiles when he explains these impossible-sounding expectations.

The 96 students who make up TECHS' first class have opted to sacrifice much of their usual high school experience for the chance to earn college credits in an innovative classroom environment. In these first days, there will be much discussion about missed traditions such as football games, school dances and drama programs. With four kids dropping out in the first week, everyone wonders if the trade-off will be worthwhile.

### Fall 2005: A Promising Start

For the next six months, Nissen experiences the happiest period of his teaching career so far. He and Dewey have the same mirror-image class schedule that he once shared with Dick Hoffman at Woodward that allows them to mold their time according to their daily needs. Unlike Nissen's Woodward experience, however, his current colleagues wholeheartedly



Student Kristeen Mill works on a political awareness project during Randy Nissen's social studies class.



**In addition to English teacher Paulette Dewey's teaching schedule, she advises the drama club, directs the student newspaper and works with teachers preparing for national accreditation. All the teachers at Toledo Early College take on duties outside the classroom.**

support what he and Dewey are creating.

In daily staff meetings, the group of five maps out cross-curricular lesson plans that add dimension to their classroom work. While Nissen introduces theories of government that range from fascism to anarchy, Dewey has students study political novels that parallel his lessons – *Fahrenheit 451* and *Animal Farm*, for example. They combine classes so Nissen can present Nazi propaganda films and Dewey can help students analyze the rhetorical devices inherent in such work. These are the types of collaborative lessons that wouldn't fit within the structure of their former schools.

Another factor that allows Nissen to push his students is that attendance is often close to 100 percent. For the first time in his urban teaching career, Nissen is able to direct long-term research projects building on lessons that flow from the previous day's studies.



In November, when the school's first wave of multi-genre research projects is presented by students who must stand alone beside 15-foot-high projections of their slides on a college auditorium stage, every strength and weakness of the new school is apparent. Beyond the obvious risk of embarrassing kids who've never before presented from a stage, the stakes are high. 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.

For Nissen and Dewey, it will also establish whether their expectations are in line with reality.

Presentations will combine content from Nissen's social studies curriculum with skills from Dewey's English class while demonstrating the student's mastery of technology resources. As Nissen supervises the technology, he stands as

tense as the kids. "If we gave an assignment of this complexity at Woodward, maybe 20 percent of the kids would do it. Here, we have higher expectations; we expect at least 80 percent mastery."

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

While Nissen watches the presentations in a room full of students, teachers, administrators and outside observers, he sometimes can't disguise a wincing expression. Some slides are obvious plagiarisms. Others don't match their topic. But when he and Dewey compare notes later, they decide that 19 demonstrate college-readiness and only nine students will require serious remedial help.

Val Napieralski is pleased by the students' performance and gives her veteran teachers full credit. "Their incredible work ethic and cooperative attitude has made all the difference," she says.

“But we always want so much more,” Dewey says.

“We’ll know how to make it better next year,” Nissen adds.

### January 2006: Off to College

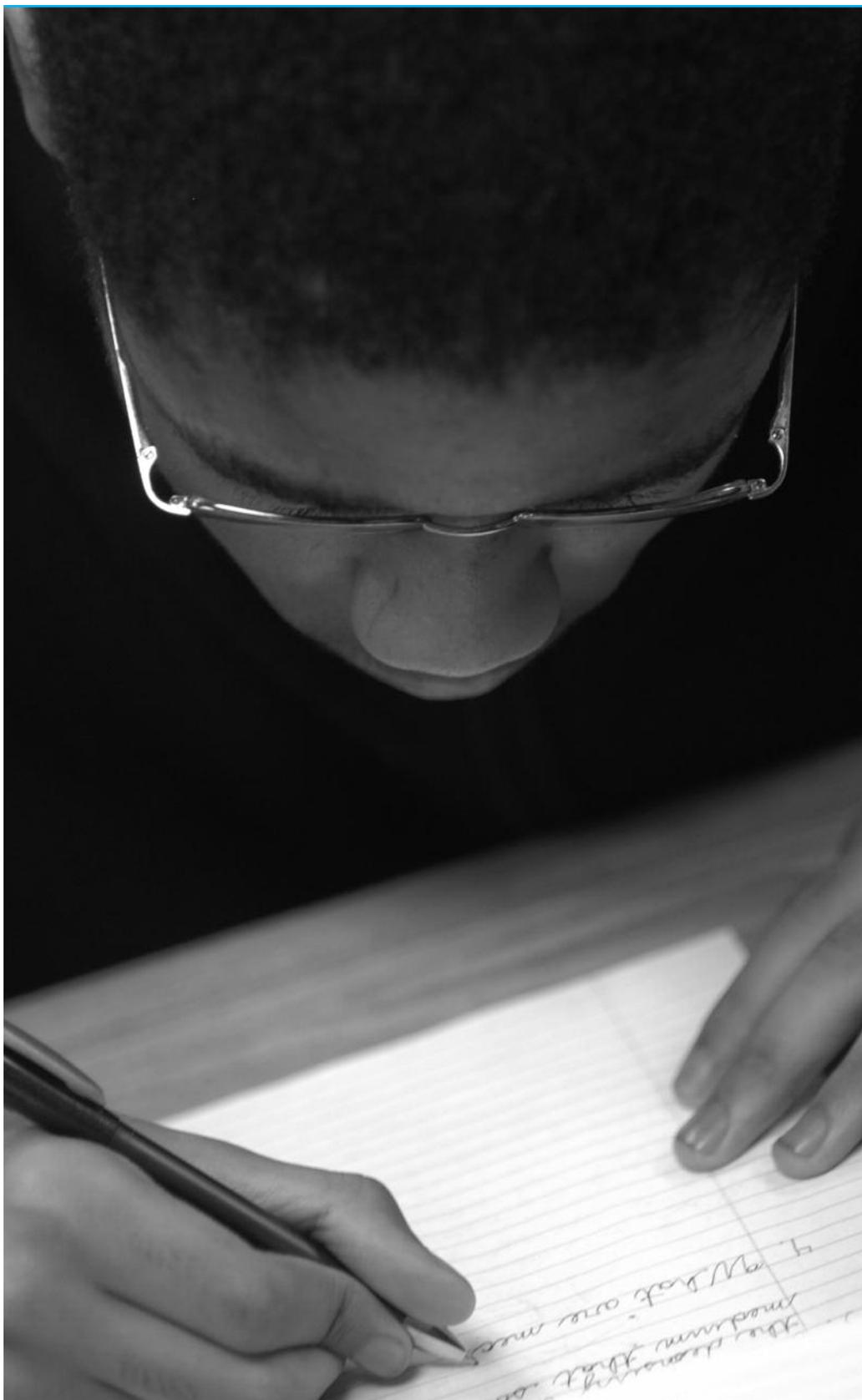
When Barbara Schneider, director of English composition at the university, learns that 14-year-olds will be entering her classes, she is not thrilled. Composition classes are designed to encourage freshmen to “begin questioning the assumptions about life they were raised believing,” she says. A 14-year-old hasn’t even *been* raised yet.

By spring, Schneider’s attitude towards Toledo Early College High School has begun to change. High school freshmen have entered composition classes designed for college freshmen and demonstrated writing skills equal to their older classmates. Sometimes their presence is conspicuous, like the girl who raised her hand to ask permission to use the restroom, as had been expected of her not so long ago in middle school. Mostly they blend in, carefully mimicking college dress.

Perhaps it’s a testament to the team of Dewey and Nissen, or maybe the Toledo Early College staff has carefully chosen whom they’re sending to college, but it’s clear that these kids are quite capable. Everyone at the university that Schneider speaks with is supportive of the new high school, but they still have questions. The ninth grade is to enter college classes full time by the time they are juniors. How many will succeed? And will future freshmen get by as well as the first group?

### April 2006: Fatigue Sets In

Launching Toledo Early College has been something like those old Andy Hardy movies where someone says, “Hey, kids, let’s put on a show!” and everyone runs for props, scenery and musical instruments. But as satisfying as the work has been, it’s also been exhausting. By April, the staff has reached burnout.



**Student De'von Thomas prepares a list of questions to present to visiting city council members who will discuss current issues in social studies class. Class work and special projects often give students experience with members of the community.**

"Our kids have matured since the year began, but they're still goofy teenagers..."

– Randy Nissen

The first six months have been exhilarating for Randy Nissen, but now he finds himself dragging through late-spring days. The deep rapport that he has built with students in this small school environment comes with a price. There's no space for a teacher's privacy or, as the kids say, "just chillin'." Big schools have planning periods and teachers' lounges. They have counselors ready to handle students' individual problems. Early College has needy students asking for tutoring during teachers' free periods.

Nissen's after-school time is taken up by a quiz bowl team he coaches. Also, he's helping 20 kids prepare for the Regional National History Day Competition.



Every project that begins during Early College's first year demands extra planning because there is no precedent. When Nissen takes on year-end activities, he can't rely on a procedural notebook for guidance because one hasn't been written yet. An awards banquet, for example, needs chairs, tables, a sound system and award plaques, but every time Nissen thinks he's got it all covered, he remembers other items he will need: extension cord, invitations, a clean-up crew.

Nissen isn't alone in investing countless hours of personal time to create traditions. Paul Tierney has organized a chess team that is competing against other high schools. Dewey supervises a school paper, drama club and yearbook. Bollin is working on a grant application he hopes

will bring in \$50,000 to create an environmental laboratory.

On the administrative end of things, Napieralski is navigating the logistics of building an infrastructure. Whereas at Bowsher Napieralski had assistants and full-time secretarial support, here she must rely on herself. "Strange as it sounds, I have the same paperwork that a large school requires," she says. "But I also have many more tasks that include talking with parents, working with students, and creating new policies and procedures. As much as possible, I try to keep the nuts-and-bolts details from the teachers, so they're free to concentrate on their classrooms."

### May 2006: Year One Ends

Despite approaching exhaustion in April, Nissen feels energized again in May as Toledo Early College's first year ends. With most students earning solid grades in their first college classes, he's proud of how well the first wave of students has done. He's satisfied, too, that the new school has given him the chance to work as part of a team to try out the lesson plans and teaching techniques he's stockpiled over the past 20 years.

Best of all, perhaps, is the history that the school is building.

"Remember when the engineering professor blocked our kids in the hall with his cane to quiet them down?" Nissen asks at a year-end teachers' luncheon.

"Yes," Paul Tierney says. "And he pounded on my wall when he heard rock music."

"Our kids have matured since the year began," Nissen says, "but they're still goofy teenagers who make more noise than traditional college students."

"Do you think they'll be any different next year?" Tierney asks.

"Not really," Nissen adds. "And what's going to happen when we double staff and students in the fall?"

### October 2006: Bumps in the Road

If all that Randy Nissen had hoped for came true in Toledo Early College's first year – a tight-knit innovative faculty, supportive principal, flexible scheduling and motivated students – his second year begins in sharp contrast. Val Napieralski has left to become supervisor of TPS' high schools, and an interim principal brings a different style to the job. Staff accustomed to Napieralski's collaborative, hands-on approach now get less information about how discipline and scheduling problems are being resolved.

As the team works to integrate its second wave of students and teachers, and the logistical problems that come with a school suddenly doubled in size, the change in leadership leaves a sizeable gap.

"Do you think we'll ever have another staff meeting?" Nissen asks over lunch in the crowded storage/copier room that serves as a faculty gathering space. Nissen and Dewey continue their collaboration, but new staff members Emily Francis and Mona Al-Hayani are anxious about following an unavailable principal and veteran teachers who shift lessons on a daily basis.

"I wonder when we're going to discuss whether college credit hours will translate to state graduation requirements," Al-Hayani says.

None of her colleagues knows the answer to her question or Nissen's.



**Principal Robin Wheatley, who joined the school in its second year, talks with representatives of Toledo Public Schools and the University of Toledo. She discusses her goals for the coming year, which include finding money to support continuing college classes for graduating seniors.**



**B**eginning in December, new principal Robin Wheatley works to restore the confidence of teachers and parents.

“In the first year, staff was mostly concerned with getting the doors opened and setting high academic standards,” Wheatley says. “The next phase will be establishing consistent policy guidelines, improving discipline and creating a framework for growing the school.”

Wheatley works to resolve issues such as how to enforce a district-wide dress code and how credits will be assigned for grade-level promotions. A typical staff meeting in January follows a long agenda of logistical issues.

“There is a natural maturing process that people and institutions experience,” Dewey says after the meeting. “And it is, by nature, painful. We are lucky that we have the opportunity to create an institution that

will be strong and endure – and reflect the values that brought us here.”

She says, “It’s like the honeymoon is over, and we’re down to creating real shape to how this school needs to look.”

Nissen is concerned that adding too much structure might take away the fun aspects of the school.

“We make such great demands on our kids, and they don’t get to blow off steam the way other kids do. They miss the dances, sporting events and extracurriculars they’d get in their neighborhood schools. The school’s overall environment should compensate for that.”

On top of teaching duties, Nissen and Dewey work to create an atmosphere that meets the social as well as academic needs of students. They support such activities as a dance, a talent show, a drama club and a year-end field trip to Greenfield Village in Michigan (that’s planned and executed by

Al-Hayani). In this way, Toledo Early College establishes a unique personality that combines innovative teaching with consistent procedures – and opportunities to be a normal high school kid.

The answers to other problems that arise during the school’s second year also lie in its dedicated staff. Dealing with immature teenagers moving freely on a college campus, coordinating schedules to accommodate overlapping college and high school classes, preparing sophomores for mandatory state testing – all are managed through creative thinking and hard work.

But the toll on teachers is heavy, and with the challenges of expanding once again ahead of them, it is unclear how long the staff can keep up the effort.

Paulette Dewey, for one, believes the school is on firm ground. She has decided to retire, but says, “I believe in this

program so much that I wouldn't have been able to walk away from it if I didn't think the school was strong enough to survive and continue developing in the right direction."

### August 12, 2007: Year Three Begins

Four years after they accepted the risk of launching this new school, Toledo Public Schools Superintendent John Foley and Chief Academic Officer Jan Kilbride hold a press conference on the first day of classes to call attention to Toledo Early College's accomplishments.

"I know that Toledo Public Schools has a lot of work ahead of us to attain the goals we've committed to reaching," Foley says. "But today I want to acknowledge the efforts of the dedicated teachers and students who have super-achieved at Toledo Early College High School. They have the highest OGT (Ohio Graduation Test) scores in the district and are one of the few urban schools in the state to be named as a School of Excellence."

After working so hard on the committee that created this school, it must be particularly satisfying for Foley and Kilbride to celebrate publicly. Nissen, who's attending an offsite meeting, videotapes the press conference. With obvious pleasure, he will replay the broadcast later that evening for family and friends.



In the auditorium down the hall from where Foley fields questions, Principal Robin Wheatley welcomes back students from summer break. She doesn't like the undercurrent of chatter and fidgeting as she speaks without a microphone about "commitment to excellence" and "expectations for a new year."

It's okay that girls wear hooded T-shirts and huge earrings while boys wear below-the-knee length shorts because students are exempt from dress code rules for the first few days of school. But they will have to maintain their discipline and maturity

"We have the opportunity to create an institution that will be strong and endure"

- Paulette Dewey

if they want to follow up on the previous years' successes.

This year, Toledo Early College will send its first class of high school juniors to full days of college classes. Wheatley wonders how a group of students who can't sit still during this 15-minute assembly will handle the freedom of moving about the main college campus.

### November 2007: A Reputation at Risk

Two months later, it turns out that Wheatley's concerns are justified. Nissen sits at a desk during his advisory period and evaluates rumors his students are repeating about juniors on campus. As the kids interrupt each other to tell their stories, he listens carefully.

"I know two girls who went to a boys' dorm."

"There's this one dude who skips class

every Wednesday and goes home."

"My mom saw (two kids) smoking in the parking lot when they were supposed to be in class."

Nissen looks around him at the posters that he transplanted from his Woodward classroom, and he's reminded of the dues he and other staff members paid to create Toledo Early College. Now that it's earned positive attention, much is at stake in fixing problems that could damage its reputation. The KnowledgeWorks grant will expire soon, and public support will be crucial in continuing the school's mission.

Nissen visits the junior class's study lounge after his advisory period to investigate the stories. As patient as Nissen seems in class while explaining the subtleties of American foreign policy, he's visibly angry at what he finds. An expensive dictionary has been thrown



Randy Nissen's classroom is covered with flyers and posters that spark ideas and discussion between him and his students.



**Student Lance Price listens to a discussion of American foreign policy before offering his own contribution.**

open and damaged on the floor. A locker door has been torn from its hinges. The only two students in the room are playing games instead of studying.

“What is going on in here?” Nissen asks, furious. Startled, the two kids stop their games. They aren’t used to seeing Mr. Nissen so upset.



Whether the rumors are true or not, Principal Robin Wheatley takes quick action to deal with them. Now in her second year at Toledo Early College, she’s learned that building a new school requires constant adjustments.

By semester’s end, students are ordered to check in with high school staff on a

daily basis to confirm they are keeping up with their college work. Also, they are encouraged to attend academic assistance classes with Toledo Early College teachers. Wheatley will push college instructors to submit the progress reports that haven’t been coming regularly. And if a student fails to attend mandatory meetings at the high school, he will be counted truant and will risk losing his student status.

“The kids have to be made accountable for their college classes,” Nissen says in a staff meeting. But he follows this with a sigh, because the new rules mean he will have to wedge tutoring and counseling time into his already crowded schedule.

### March 2008: A Convert, Of Sorts

Only two years ago, Barbara Schneider was skeptical about Toledo Early College students entering the university composition classes she directs. However, as someone from a large family who earned her college tuition by working multiple jobs from age 16, she could hardly stand in the way of their ambitions.

Surprisingly, the high schoolers are keeping up with their assignments and demonstrating solid mechanical skills – even if “flashes of original insight aren’t quite there yet.” The results have not only caused her to question her assumptions about what younger students can accomplish; they’ve also challenged her ideas about the university’s core curriculum. “If fifteen-year-olds can do this work, what does it say about our classes?” she asks.

She knows that a complete assessment of the school won’t be possible until the first class graduates in a year, but in the meantime, Toledo Early College offers “an interesting opportunity to take a new look at American education.”

## May 2008: 'Now I Want to Learn More'

Randy Nissen doesn't have time to ponder the past as he hustles from a year-end planning meeting with Principal Robin Wheatley to his academic assistance class where 16 students are gathering to meet him. But this is precisely the kind of teaching day Nissen dreamed of five years ago. A half-dozen freshmen are huddled over laptops producing their own political advertisements – a lesson that combines language arts, computer skills and current events.

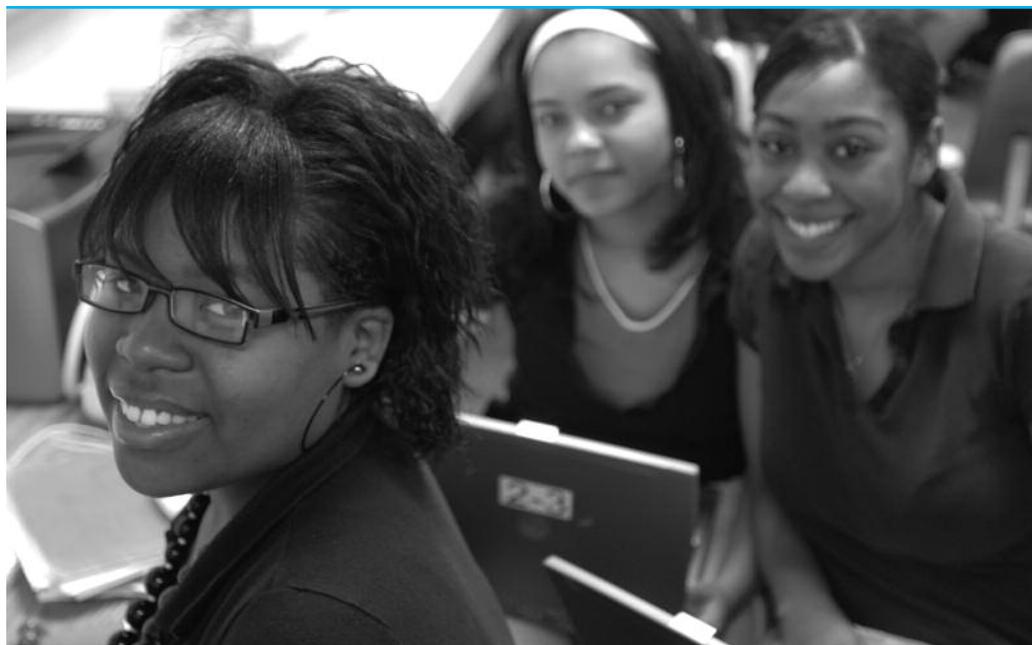
"I never thought coming here would be so much work," says a student named Taylor, fidgeting with her ponytail. "But I like this assignment because I got to learn new technology."

Her friend C.J. nods in agreement. "Weren't you surprised at how many fringe candidates there were?" she asks.

Amanda, who's adding sound to her commercial, sits on a study table and swings her legs. "At Early College everyone gets opportunities. It isn't just one class going on a field trip. The university offers events anyone can attend – like a jazz concert that I wouldn't have thought about before, or the holocaust survivor who spoke at the library this morning. Learning about different cultures in the diversity program made me sign up for a world religions class in college. Who thinks about other religions? But now I want to learn more."

Another six students, mostly sophomores and juniors, are quietly studying for college exams. Nissen takes a third group into the hallway for individual tutoring.

When Nissen leans his head in the doorway to check on the quiet classroom,



**Working on projects for National History Day, Starr Bibbs, Kerina Brown and Jasmine Warfield pause to answer a visitor's questions about Toledo Early College.**

he doesn't know he's just missed seeing a strong example of what Toledo Early College has accomplished – an example that goes beyond potentially at-risk, average students from central city junior high schools producing college-level independent research papers.

When some suddenly noisy freshmen are told to "shut up" by a stressed-out classmate, C.J. and Taylor step in and skillfully defuse a quickly escalating confrontation. "Hey, just be cool," one girl says soothingly, while the other quiets the noisy table. The incident resolves in less than a minute, a testament to the benefits of a learning environment based on relationships.



Two weeks later, Nissen stands outside his classroom door – almost lost in the swirling mass of students that flows through the hallway between classes. As Toledo Early College's third year comes to a close, Nissen's eyes have a puffy, sleepless appearance and he's leaning against his classroom's doorframe.

Nissen is helping students struggling to complete research on local government only two hours before an afternoon panel discussion with city council members. And, once again, he's working on the committee that will produce year-end events.

But the signs of exhaustion quickly give way to pride when he greets a visitor. "Hey, did you hear how the juniors did on their finals?" Nissen asks in an up-tempo voice.

Other signs of the school's sustainability abound. For example, Mona Al-Hayani and Emily Francis have become active partners in directing the development of Toledo Early College's humanities curriculum in the wake of Paulette Dewey's retirement.

A few days later, more tangible proof of the school's success arrives. The 2008

"At Early College everyone gets opportunities."

– Amanda, Toledo Early College student



**Emily Francis challenges her freshman and sophomore English students with a choice of classic novels. Student Jessica Petrey has picked Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and attends Francis' Austen seminar.**

OGT scores improve, besting even the previous year's district-leading numbers.

Instead of looking forward to relaxing over the summer, Nissen is excited about a project students will be doing with Ohio University over the summer to document historic sites in Toledo. "When we first talked about building a curriculum that was relevant, rigorous and based on relationships, this was exactly what we wanted to do," he says. "Over the summer, we're going to develop a way to bring

learning right into the neighborhoods where these kids live."

In spring of 2009, Toledo Early College will graduate its first class – students who might not be considered college material under other circumstances but who will have earned as much as two years of college credit along with a high school diploma.

"If we can help at-risk kids achieve this much over three years," Nissen says, "imagine how much more we're going to accomplish in years to come." ■

## Postscript

*The success of Toledo Early College High School's juniors who are taking a full schedule of college classes vindicates the work of the program's many supporters. What's more, the struggle for school reform that gave rise to TECHS and other innovations has invigorated the whole of Toledo Public Schools. English teacher Meighan Richardson, for example, became one of the founders of Phoenix Academy, a technology-driven school dedicated to educating "last chance" dropout and at-risk students. Counselor Sarah Barman remained at Woodward and championed the development of the innovative Freshman Academy scheduled to open in school year 2008-2009.*

*Gene Sanders moved to Cleveland as superintendent and carried his ideas to its larger school district. Dan Johnson negotiated a merger between Medical University of Toledo and the University of Toledo that has enhanced study and research opportunities for thousands of students.*

*Now that Toledo Early College High School has proven the possibility of its mission, it faces strong challenges for the future. It must sustain its ability to accommodate growth, secure more stable funding as its founding grant expires and continue to showcase the best in innovative instruction.*



### About the storyteller

**Larry Levy is the director of the Glass House Writing Project, a nonprofit program**

**that supports the teaching of creative writing in schools. A resident of Toledo, he also teaches writing to children in prison and is working on his first novel.**

# Every Student Deserves a Legacy

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

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### *A Different School of Thought*

Breaking with tradition, innovative educators plan and launch Toledo Early College, which blends high school and college.

### *Starting from Scratch*

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

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