

Early College High Schools Beat the Odds

By Marlene B. Seltzer

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When Diego Camposeco, a high school student in the rural lowlands of eastern North Carolina, checked his email this spring, a dream came true. He found out he will be the first in his family to attend college. Not only that, he will enter the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill with one of UNC's prestigious four-year "full-ride" scholarships.

So, how did this son of immigrants beat the odds? Camposeco attends Pender Early College High School in Burgaw, a public school where underprepared students are challenged with rigorous standards, extensive academic supports, and real college courses. In fact, this May, Camposeco will graduate with a high school diploma from the district and an Associate's degree from Cape Fear Community College.

Consider these numbers. Only 52 percent of students from low-income families graduate high school and enter college and even fewer—21 percent—attain a college degree, compared with 84 percent and 49 percent of students, respectively, from the middle and upper levels of the socioeconomic ladder. Not only is the achievement gap wide. The education pipeline for a majority of all our students is broken.

As we seek to revamp a system that keeps far too many young people from succeeding, the 210 early college high schools across the nation—such as the one Camposeco attends—open up higher education to a much more diverse group of students. Take, for example, North Carolina: half of their early college high schools had zero dropouts at a time when about 30 percent of the nation's high school students fail to earn a diploma in four years, and when barely half of African-Americans and Latinos graduate from high school in many states.

Texas has also invested in the "college in the high school" strategy. With 42 early college high schools already in place, the state is also extending a tailored version of the model to its regular district high schools. Several other statewide efforts are underway to integrate college coursework and expectations into high school.

Seven years ago, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and 13 national intermediaries launched the Early College High School Initiative to great fan fair and skepticism. The big question: Could low-income and minority students meet the challenge of academic acceleration versus remediation. Well, the initiative has accumulated a remarkable record of student achievement since 2002.

Nearly 50,000 students in 24 states are enrolled in early college high schools across the country. Fifty-nine percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch (a federal poverty measure) and 70 percent are students of color. Twenty-two percent of early college graduates in 2009 earned a high school diploma and an Associate's degree, and 86 percent went on to some form of postsecondary education in the fall of that year, compared to only one-third of all high school graduates nationally. In fact, a number of early college schools are doing especially well in preparing black and Latino young men for college success, a population that struggles the most in terms of graduating high school.

And on top of these amazing outcomes are the savings to parents—early college high school students earn their college credit tuition free.

Many schools, districts, and states are stepping up to the plate, connecting high school students directly to college by supporting “college in the high school” designs. But if we expect the early college movement to achieve life-changing results for thousands of more young people now underrepresented in higher education, we are going to need even more districts and states to embrace this proven model.