



OCC gives high school students early start

By KAREN AUCHTERLONIE
Of The Oakland Press

A new high school will open next fall, boasting a five-year program that will have students graduating with both a high school diploma and associate's degree.

"There's no out-of-pocket cost for the family," said Gary Weisserman, interim principal for the new school and director of early college and K-16 initiatives at the University of Michigan-Flint.

Called Oakland Early College, the school is a partnership between Oakland Community College and the West Bloomfield School District, and is the first of its kind in Oakland County.

"It's a fairly simple concept - a high school on a college campus," said Jacqueline Shadko, president of OCC's Orchard Ridge Campus, at a January OCC board meeting.

Though details are still being finalized, the school will open on OCC's Orchard Ridge campus in Farmington Hills on Aug. 28 for grades 10 and 11.

"Each year, we'll basically add a grade so that by the third year, we'll have grades nine through 13 and it will be 60 students we're targeting for each grade," said Kendra Hearn, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at West Bloomfield schools.

About five or six teachers from West Bloomfield schools will start teaching high school classes at OCC next fall, and the number of teachers will grow as more grades are added.

"Ninth- and 10th-graders basically will be taking high school classes in classrooms on our campus. By the time they're in the 11th grade, they'll be moving out of those classrooms and into regular college classes," Shadko said.

At that time, students will sign up for and attend college courses as they are offered by OCC, assimilating the students into the regular college population.

While it usually takes four years to earn a high school diploma and two more to earn an associate's degree, the early college plan double-counts some of the required courses and allows students to complete both degrees in less time.

If the student does not want to pursue an associate's degree, they will instead

earn at least 60 college credits that can be transferred to another college or university. Tentative degree programs to be offered through the early college are associate's degrees in liberal arts, business and entrepreneurship, and fine and performing arts.

There are about 160 early colleges throughout the nation and about six in Michigan, though many of the programs in Michigan are still in a developing stage.

"It's a wonderful program. Governor Granholm mentioned early colleges in her State of the State address," Shadko said.

Students do not have to pay for any of the college classes taken, and so long as 60 students per grade are enrolled for this fall's semester, the West Bloomfield district will break even, Hearn said.

"West Bloomfield will cover the cost of college classes, so when you stop and think about it, the West Bloomfield district with its state funding will cover the cost of a high school and college education," Shadko said.

The full-time equivalency funding given to the school per student from the state will be used to cover the costs of the early college, Hearn said.

"Unfortunately, we're not able to give funds for providing transportation for students," Hearn said.

A SMART bus does stop at the campus and Hearn plans to talk with SMART to learn what could be worked out for the students, she said. Otherwise, parents will be responsible for providing transportation.

Although the West Bloomfield School District only accepts students outside the district through Schools of Choice for grades K-6, it will open Schools of Choice to high school students interested in attending the early college.

"The school would not only be open to West Bloomfield residents, but also students who reside in Oakland County," Hearn said.

"This is a selective program. It will involve an application, essay and interviews to make sure our students in this school are ready for a small high school on a college campus," Hearn said.

Rather than targeting the high-achieving student, the at-risk or underachieving student is ideal for the program, officials say.

"Most early colleges have a relentless focus on serving the underserved and under-represented," Hearn said.

"Early colleges have seen profound results with those kids, as far as shifting away from remediation and towards acceleration," she added.

At Mott Middle College High School in Flint, data kept since 1991 shows that the incoming grade point average of most students ranges between 1.2 and 1.9, but the average student GPA by graduation is between 3.1 and 3.2, said Shadko.

"When you continually see kids held to less than stellar expectations although they are completely capable, I think that prevents them from being in college," Hearn said.

"We're hoping to tap into that as early as the eighth grade, because oftentimes those kids end up in the alternative schools. Instead of putting them on that pathway, we want to put them on the pathway to college," she added.

The school will not discriminate against students who may not meet the at-risk profile so long as they are qualified through the application and interview process, which is still being worked on, Hearn said.

Open houses where families can visit the campus, meet with early college officials and get more information will be advertised in March.

"Kids are like goldfish in that they will grow to the size of their tanks. It is so important to think of how we can take kids and put them in an environment that honors learning and where they're going to see college expectations, not just aspirations, modeled," Weisserman said.

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