



Early College High School Is Changing Students' Lives and Futures in Lawrence, Massachusetts

An Education Powerhouse: Massachusetts Early College High Schools

AT A GLANCE

Hundreds of students at Lawrence High School are getting a head start on their college careers, thanks to an innovative model that helps students prepare for and earn college degrees while in high school. They're taking college courses and accumulating college credits—at no cost to their families.

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NOVEMBER 2021

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the leaders of the early college high school partnership in Lawrence, including Kevin Dean, humanities pathways supervisor at Lawrence High School; Marcy Yeager, executive director of PK-12 partnerships and international programs at Northern Essex Community College; and Russell Olwell, associate dean, School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College. They shared their insight on the partnership, provided data about student progress, and took time from their busy schedules to answer our many questions to get the details right. The images in the report were provided by staff members at Lawrence High School.

The authors would also like to thank JFF Vice President Joel Vargas for his insightful comments, along with Senior Communications Manager Kim Perrella and the entire JFF communications team for their support in shaping and producing this series.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation

The Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation invests in organizations that improve human health, raise educational attainment, increase economic security, and meet community needs. Its mission is to effect permanent positive change in the lives of individuals and families across Greater Boston, especially in economically disadvantaged communities. The Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation provides funds to JFF to support the growing movement for early college high schools in Massachusetts.

About the Massachusetts Early College High School Community of Practice

Massachusetts launched its Early College Initiative in 2017, encouraged by almost two decades of national research showing that early colleges have a track record of success in ensuring that young people from low-income households prepare for and earn college degrees. In 2018, the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation provided funding to JFF to lead a community of practice to support the growth and ensure the quality of six of the state's 26 early college partnerships. Early college high school programs enable students in grades 9 through 12 to earn at least 12 transferable college credits—and up to an associate's degree in a career pathway—by the time they graduate from high school. Early college accelerates college and career readiness for students from low-income households, English learners, and those whose prior academic experiences may not have prepared them well for a collegiate path.

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Graduates from the first cohort of Lawrence High School early college students at Northern Essex Community College

Introduction

Today, 250 students at Lawrence High School (LHS) are getting a huge head start on their college careers. They're taking college courses and accumulating college credits—at no cost to their families. Kevin Dean, who leads the high school's early college team, brims with pride and optimism. His ambitious goal is to transform all of LHS to an early college within five years:

“Five years from now, all of Lawrence High School will be an early college. Every student will know they are college capable and will be taking college courses,” Dean says. “We won’t need a special program. The mindset of our community will have shifted entirely about what our kids can achieve.”¹

This is the story of how a high school in one of the formerly lowest-performing districts in Massachusetts, together with two neighboring colleges, took responsibility for changing the life trajectories of increasing numbers of young people in just five years. A decade ago, LHS was labeled a “failing school” by the state. When the state education department took control of the Lawrence Public Schools in 2012 due to chronic underperformance, barely more than half of LHS students were graduating in four years.

Today, high school graduation rates have improved substantially, and hundreds of high school students who had been statistically unlikely to attend college are earning college credits at nearby Merrimack College or Northern Essex Community College (NECC) before high school graduation. Most will go on to earn postsecondary degrees.

Symbolic of this progress is 19-year-old Mariel Bloise, who spoke no English when she arrived in Lawrence from the Dominican Republic in 2015. On June 1, 2021, the Lawrence City Council, which recognizes one outstanding college graduate each year, honored her for academic success. After completing the early college program at LHS in 2019, she earned her associate’s degree with

honors in biology from NECC last spring. Early college “was a blessing for me and my family,” she told the city council. Now Bloise is transferring to UMass Lowell to continue her studies in biology and hopes to become a physician’s assistant after earning a bachelor’s degree.²

Early college high school programs typically take around five years to grow from design to full implementation; this is typically when programs start to see students achieve the expected level of academic success. Lawrence’s results today are right on target—the early college program started in 2017—and that’s a major achievement. This school district and its community have long faced multiple interconnected challenges that tend to be correlated with low academic performance, including a high level of economic insecurity, many English learners, and a large number of students with disabilities. Additionally, the state found that “the quality of teaching and school leadership varied greatly . . . and expectations for students were persistently low.”³

This report demonstrates the success of the early college high school program at LHS, despite these challenges. It has improved outcomes for participants, significantly increasing the chances that they will enter college right after high school and earn a degree. While no single

educational intervention is a panacea, early college deserves to be scaled—in Lawrence and across the state.

It's the students themselves, like Mariel Bloise, who put their effort and long hours into learning. But the success of Lawrence's early college program is ultimately possible because a well-staffed and collaborative team of educators are leveraging their expertise and commitment to students to make the ambitious dream a reality. The early college team does the

daily work of running the program with an eye toward immediate identification of potential stumbling blocks for students and the capacity to respond rapidly with effective solutions. In addition, its work has always been unfailingly championed by district, school, and college leaders engaged in the partnership. The bottom line is that students trust the adults around them to provide guidance and feedback and to have their backs at every step of their way toward a college degree.



The Spring 2018 Early College Recognition Ceremony at NECC

How Early College Came to Lawrence

Lawrence prides itself on being a city of immigrants and “has always been a multiethnic and multicultural gateway city with a high percentage of foreign-born residents.”⁴ The Irish arrived in the mid-1800s to work in Lawrence’s textile mills lining the Merrimack River. Successive waves of immigration brought people from across the globe, including the English, Poles, and Syrians. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans began settling in Lawrence in the mid-to-late 1900s, and today Latinx culture is vibrant across the city. The newest arrivals are from Vietnam and Cambodia and are also making their marks on the community’s rich culture.

Lawrence’s schools reflect the demographics of the community. Most students come from racial, ethnic, income, or learning backgrounds that are underrepresented in U.S. higher education—making the goals of the early college program particularly meaningful. More than 90 percent of students identify as Hispanic, and for more than 72 percent, English is not the first language they learned. Many students are bilingual

when they enter high school, speaking both English and the primary language of their family, but 36 percent are learning their first English in school. More than 70 percent of students have been identified as “economically disadvantaged” and 18 percent have a disability.⁵

When the district was placed under state receivership in 2012, only 52 percent of students were graduating from high school in four years. Led by a state-appointed receiver who served as superintendent, a devoted set of local youth advocates, and Lawrence educators, the district homed in on removing the barriers it could influence and supporting students in overcoming the barriers it could not control. And its approach paid off.

Jeffrey C. Riley was the receiver charged with the district’s turnaround; he is now the Massachusetts commissioner of elementary and secondary education. Under Riley’s leadership, the district laid out four strategic outcomes to work toward:⁶

- **Outcome 1:** Increase instructional time for students, improve the collection and use of data to inform decision making, and raise expectations for academic rigor
- **Outcome 2:** Build and cultivate a strong team of staff and leaders, develop high-quality partnerships, and use resources effectively and efficiently
- **Outcome 3:** Provide strong social and emotional supports, develop targeted supports for students with disabilities and who are English learners, and better engage families
- **Outcome 4:** Increase systemwide autonomy, accountability, and supports for schools across the district

By 2016, the graduation rate had improved to 71 percent, scores on the MCAS exam (Massachusetts’s educational proficiency assessment) had risen substantially, the absentee rate had fallen, and the community was looking to the high school with hope.⁷ Indeed, educators began to

look to the district as a model for school turnaround, a strategy with few true successes.⁸ With these improvements in place, the high school was ready to move beyond turnaround to the next level.

The introduction of early college took place without fanfare. Convinced by national data on the success of early college students, Riley and Mike Fiato, the head of school at LHS at the time, identified early college as the approach most likely to have the greatest impact on students’ lives and futures. The Lawrence team found one key component of early college particularly compelling: that teens start accumulating college credits as early as grade 9 or 10 at no cost to families. They also believed that an early focus on future careers would help make academic coursework more engaging and relevant to students.

Today, early college students at LHS are

The goal for Lawrence leaders was not just to increase the high school graduation rate but to grow a younger generation of skilled, college-educated adults. The hope was that graduates would either make their homes in the city and power its economic future or move elsewhere and bring their positive experiences in Lawrence with them.

A Rich Partnership: JFF's Work in Lawrence

In 2016, Riley approached JFF to discuss how we would approach the design and implementation of early college at LHS. Drawing on our then more than a decade of experience as a national leader in the development of early college high schools across the country, JFF worked closely and collaboratively with LHS staff to develop and carry out its early college strategy.

JFF's work in Lawrence has also extended beyond implementing early college. With generous funding from the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation and support from the city of Lawrence, JFF's Pathways to Prosperity Network assessed the local labor market in 2017. This work laid the groundwork for the design of college and career pathways at LHS and for ongoing professional development and coaching for district personnel. Over several years, JFF led learning sessions with teachers, counselors, and administrators to develop a better understanding of pathways strategies and how to use labor market information in pathways design and in student advising.

JFF continues its partnership with LHS today through the Massachusetts Early College Learning Community supported by the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation.

well informed about career options and choose a pathway from five high-demand sectors of the regional labor market: information technology, health care, education, STEM, and arts and media. As one Lawrence early college leader reported in an interview: "Right now, as students are registering and choosing pathways, they know much better what they want for careers than when we started out.

Many are STEM focused. It raises some eyebrows to see this kind of high ambition from young ones but I think it's highly, highly encouraging, and really exciting. They really feel prepared and confident."⁹

As Massachusetts expands early college partnerships in the state, Lawrence stands as an exemplar for what can be accomplished.

Early Success in Lawrence's Early College

Data collected over two decades from across the United States confirms that early college high schools are an effective pathway to a college degree, especially for young people from populations that are underrepresented in higher education. Early college enrollment leads to increased rates of high school graduation, immediate postsecondary attendance, and college graduation compared with the rates for peers who do not attend an early college.¹⁰



An LHS student receives cords for participating in the early college program at the Spring 2018 Early College Recognition Ceremony at NECC.

Lawrence's early success is made clear by this national context. Over the last several decades, as the country has focused more on the need to increase college completion rates, researchers have synthesized massive amounts of data to develop standard predictors of college degree completion. Early college students in Lawrence are performing well in four of the strongest predictors of college success:

1 College students graduate at higher rates when they enter without needing to take remedial courses.

Students who do not perform well enough on standardized placement exams are required to take (and pay for) non-credit math and writing courses before they can take courses that count toward their graduation. Not only are they less likely to graduate, but 40 percent of community college students who are required to take remedial courses drop out without even completing those classes.¹¹ Lawrence early college students take the required college-credit math and writing courses in 11th grade before they even enter college.

2 Students have much higher rates of success if they enter college within six months of graduating high school.

The longer students wait to apply to college after high school, the more challenging it becomes for them to enroll and finish.¹²

The two most recent cohorts of LHS early college students were twice as likely to matriculate in college immediately after high school graduation than their LHS peers who were not in early college. Nearly 60 percent of early college students who graduated in 2019 went on to attend four-year colleges; this percentage jumped to 75 for the class of 2020.

In the class of 2019, 59 percent of early college students enrolled in four-year college, compared with 29 percent of their non-early-college LHS peers. In the class of 2020, 75 percent of LHS early college students went on to a four-year college, which is two percentage points higher than the four-year college attendance rate for Massachusetts high school students overall.

3 Students who persist into their second year of college are also more likely to graduate;

this is an even stronger predictor of completion than immediate enrollment. In the class of 2019, 82 percent of early

college students persisted to their second year of college. Students' average GPA was 3.2, a solid B in college coursework.

4 College students who enroll in full-time study are also more likely to complete their degrees.

That is why Complete College America, an organization founded in 2009 to increase college completion rates, started its "15 to finish" campaign. If students take 15 credits each semester, they are more likely to graduate on time.¹³

Of all LHS graduates who are in college, 78 percent are attending full time.

The value of going to college extends beyond just earning a degree. Students also prepare for their future careers, encounter new ideas, and broaden their social networks. Financial well-being increases with each level of education attained within each racial and ethnic group.¹⁴ An associate's degree, for example, adds about \$200,000 in lifetime earnings over a high school diploma.¹⁵ And finally, those with associate's degrees or higher were less likely to have been unemployed during the pandemic than those with only a high school diploma.¹⁶

While it's too early to say anything about lifetime earnings of young people who are in their early twenties today, across these key measures, early college graduates from Lawrence appear to be prepared for future success and economic well-being.

Progress Amid Calamities

The school district's progress since 2012 is even more impressive when placed in the context of several major disasters the community endured during this time. In September 2018, the city of Lawrence experienced a horrendous gas explosion that displaced 30,000 people in the Merrimack Valley and left over 8,000 families, mainly in Lawrence, without utilities. Many residents found themselves

homeless at the onset of cold weather in December. A thousand LHS students were placed in hotels or with relatives. The recovery was slow and costly.¹⁷ Lawrence was also among the Massachusetts cities hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and in June 2021 had the highest infection rate in the state.¹⁸ Given these events, it is no wonder that some groups are working to change the narrative around the city (*see Why Lawrence?*).

Why Lawrence?

The Lawrence Partnership, a private-public economic development collaborative in the city, has launched a campaign called “Why Lawrence?” aimed at telling “a more complete story” of a city on the rise—rather than one focused on the disasters that are too often in the headlines.¹⁹ Read the collaborative’s belief statement below:

“We believe in Lawrence and the future of the community. But it is not blind faith or hollow optimism that gives us hope—it is the incredible assets present in the community that excite us about what is possible here. It is our history, our accessibility, and our culture; it is innovative companies, talented workforce and entrepreneurial spirit that excite us. But these are not the stories traditionally told about Lawrence, and so our community represents a well-kept secret about the opportunity to grow, prosper, and thrive. We intend to change that by telling stories about the real Lawrence, the one that is anchored by its greatest asset: its people. Please join us in watching these stories, sharing them, and being part of them.”

Source: www.lawrencepartnership.org/whylawrence

The Road Ahead

Over the past five years, the poverty rate in Lawrence has shrunk 7 percent, and households are now earning a median income that is \$8,000 higher than in 2015.²⁰ Still, there's a long way to go.

The city's median income is \$44,613, just over half the statewide median income of \$85,843.²¹ Fewer than 11 percent of

Lawrence's population have completed a bachelor's degree or higher level of education—roughly the same percentage as in 2015, but successful early college programs are helping to increase this number.²² While state MCAS scores and graduation rates still are below the state average, the high school's five-year graduation rate increased to 79.8 percent in 2020.²³



The Spring 2018 Early College Recognition Ceremony at NECC

The Early College Experience in Lawrence

It's tough for a high school to educate 3,200 students in one building. Thus, Kevin Dean's aspiration that every LHS student should be an early college student in five years is hugely ambitious. Today, about 25 percent of 11th and 12th graders have signed on to an accelerated high school education and an early start on a college and career pathway. Four years into the implementation of early college, word about students' success is changing how young people and their families, teachers, and counselors think about how early college can help set a path to economic well-being. Recruiting is easier now that awareness of early college is more widespread, and students who sign on are quick to decide on a career pathway and get started. As Cynthia Paris, the superintendent who took over from Riley, noted, "I'm so proud of the accomplishments of our early college students and know that the program will grow with the dedicated support of our two wonderful college partners."

And there are a number of good things happening for students. First, early college students can set aside the biggest worry

for their families: paying for a college education. With the philanthropically supported College Promise program providing free tuition at NECC, as well as generous Pioneer scholarships provided by Merrimack College, the likelihood that current early college students will earn college degrees is excellent. As Lane Glenn, the longtime president of NECC, explained: "We raised a million dollars for the early college scholarship promise program. Ten years ago, we had nothing to look at. Now, we've had commencement speakers who are early college graduates. So success builds on success; the faculty have seen the success now, so buy-in is strong."²⁴

Second, early college shortens time to completion. Students arrive in college with one semester completed at Merrimack and up to a year of credits at NECC.

Third, and just as important, every single early college student has learned how to ask for and use available support for academic and personal issues. Many have also learned to help the peers coming along behind them.

Jesus Guzman, an LHS early college graduate who just completed his first year at NECC, said this of this experience: “I’m still getting lots of support from early college and the [College] Promise scholarship. . . . It’s really important to keep in mind that it doesn’t stop at high school, right? So that support is still with you. And I’ve never felt out of place, so I think that’s also a good thing to keep in mind.”²⁵

Two Early College Programs in One High School

What does LHS do to recruit and prepare new cohorts of early college students? It mounts two slightly different early college programs: one at Merrimack College, a small residential Catholic college a few miles from Lawrence; and one at NECC, one of the state’s 15 two-year institutions. To make all this happen, LHS, NECC, and Merrimack College field a collaborative team of professionals who promote, support, and manage early college together. Students can take courses at both institutions.

Partnership With Merrimack College

Abbott Lawrence Academy (ALA), an honors exam school within LHS, admits 100 students each year and partners with Merrimack College. The majority of ALA

students enter early college, which is featured prominently on the ALA website. By the time students start taking courses at Merrimack, they’ve been on field trips to the college, met professors, and gotten to know some of their older ALA/Merrimack classmates, who hop on the LHS bus at 8 a.m. to attend their college courses and are back to resume their high school programs by 9:30 or 10 a.m. ALA even begins aligning its curriculum to Merrimack’s starting in the 10th grade to prepare all students for the academic rigor of college work.

Getting Ready for Early College

During students’ sophomore year, teachers work with early college program staff members to review their entire class list and identify which of their students are ready for college-level courses. Any ALA student can express their interest in entering the early college program if they are on track academically. Students who are on the cusp of being ready have individual advising sessions with LHS staff members and cocreate a plan to improve their grades and gain their teachers’ recommendations to join the early college program in 11th grade. On the postsecondary side, a Merrimack dean champions the program and, with the help of their small team, ensures its success.

Christopher Hopey, president of Merrimack College, is also fully supportive of the partnership: “Early college programs that bring students to a campus and introduce them to college faculty are needed to help high school students become truly ready for what comes next. These programs need to build skills in key academic areas, such as literacy, as well as provide socialization on the campus.”

Said one ALA student in a recruitment video, “It’s super cool. . . . It’s like a whole different world. You get a taste of that world but also come back home to ALA.”²⁶

Taking College Courses

Attending college with the support of the high school as a “home base” enables these students to enter Merrimack full time and flourish, avoiding the culture shock that makes the first semester of college so perilous for many. ALA offers a range of pathways designed to prepare students for high-demand career fields that pay good wages, such as engineering, health, and criminology. ALA students take one Merrimack class per semester: Their junior-year classes are biology and politics; in the fall of their senior year, they are given the choice between psychology or data science; and for their final semester, they can choose one of 13 preapproved courses based on their pathway. All classes until spring of their senior year are

taken with a cohort of other early college students. By their final semester, ALA students are in classes with traditional college students.

All Merrimack professors who teach early college students participate in professional development activities to prepare for working with younger students. They all maintain strong relationships with Lawrence’s early college program to ensure student success, whether their classes contain only early college students or a hybrid group. ALA students attend classes on the Merrimack campus several days per week, and on their “off” days, they have access to a support teacher on the high school campus who can help with challenging reading material and assignments.

As a result of the commitment and wide-ranging support from instructors and administrators at both the high school and college, students in Merrimack’s early college program are as or more successful than their Merrimack College peers; some stay on to graduate from Merrimack, and others enroll at other postsecondary institutions, including Harvard University, Salem State University, UMass Amherst, and Tufts University.

Partnership With Northern Essex Community College

Getting Ready for Early College

The LHS program with NECC focuses primarily on grades 11 and 12. LHS recruits early college students starting in grade 9 and continuing through the end of grade 10, when students decide whether to commit to the program. Whereas ALA students are designated as honor students when they enter grade 9, some students in the NECC program need encouragement from teachers and counselors to feel ready to take on college courses in high school. Recruitment has grown easier over the past year or two because teachers and guidance counselors throughout the school community have been encouraging students to apply; they have seen the promising data on students' success in earning college credit and heard their students' proud stories. Kevin Dean noted, "This year, our advisory program staff have designed and are running a weekly college awareness lesson for 10th graders and their teachers. That's been a big help."²⁷

In the spring semester of their sophomore year, all LHS students take a college-readiness reading and writing assessment jointly developed by the high school and college faculties. This assessment is administered as an assignment in regular classes and provides the high school with

data about all of its students' academic levels. For those who have shown an interest in early college, the assessment indicates whether they are ready to take a credit-bearing college course in 11th grade or need more support to help them prepare.

Once students meet the assessment standard and commit to early college, they and their families attend a mandatory but festive and fun information night held in both Spanish and English. All attendees are encouraged to ask questions and to review sample classes and pathway maps. At the information session, students and parents sign a contract agreeing to meet the program's expectations.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment for the 2021-22 school year was conducted online, with the LHS team offering information sessions both during the day and in the evening. The online events presented an unexpected advantage, in that it was easier for family members who were working nontraditional hours or could not have joined in person to attend. LHS staff members will continue to offer at least one virtual information night moving forward.

Taking College Courses

Junior year is where the partnership between the high school and the college really shines. Students are well prepared to make curricular choices among the career pathways offered. Rising juniors pick their first early college courses after a one-on-one advising session with an LHS staff member; they choose their second-semester courses during a session with an NECC advisor. Teachers and advisors coach students through online registration—a rite of passage for new college students. The advising experience is “hugely beneficial,” according to one of the LHS program team members; the students learn that in visiting a college advisor, they must have their questions and plans well in order, since the advisor will focus on course selection and scheduling. High school advising, in contrast, is more open-ended and informal. A team member also noted that it was gratifying that students’ excellent preparation showed in their tenacity throughout the pandemic.²⁸ Some dropped one of their two college courses to pick up more hours at work to support their families, but few dropped out of the program.

LHS and NECC collaborate to ensure that students have everything they need to be successful throughout this new experience. For example, one big goal is to make sure

that during students’ NECC orientation, they learn not just who is there to support them but how and when to ask for help. Students also learn how to use Blackboard, the NECC learning management system, are introduced to college life through summer college courses, and take part in individual advising sessions with a professional NECC advisor.

Selecting and Beginning a Career Pathway

Course selection is a delicate balancing act between students’ career interests, the required courses for a student’s career pathway (the equivalent of a college major or concentration), and school scheduling needs. LHS gives students the opportunity to take two college courses per semester in one of seven career pathways (STEM, health care, business, criminal justice, etc.) as well as a course in the summer. Each career pathway is preset with only a few choices. Because many students don’t yet know what they want to do for a career by grade 11, most of the junior-year classes are general education curriculum requirements that give students the ability to switch into a different pathway later in their studies. These general education college classes count toward both high school graduation and college requirements.

All juniors take a mandatory two-semester core class in English composition and choose their second course from a selection of sociology, public speaking, ethics, and psychology—all three credit courses that count toward their career pathway. As the chart below shows, in the fall of their senior year, classes are differentiated by requirements—for example, human bio is required in health care and microeconomics in business. By the end of their senior year at LHS,

students have completed not only the general education courses but also the foundational courses for their career pathway. By the time of high school graduation, most students will have completed around 30 early college credits or a full year of college. The general education block of courses transfers as a whole to any public higher education institution in the Commonwealth. For a sample of required courses in health care and business, see below.

	 Healthcare	 Business
Year 1 Fall	ENG101 English Comp I PSY101 Intro to Psychology	ENG101 English Comp I PSY101 Intro to Psychology
Year 1 Spring	ENG102 English Comp II HES102 Learning Strategies Healthcare	ENG102 English Comp II BUS101 Intro to Business
Year 1 Summer	COM111 Public Speaking OR COM112 Interpersonal Communication	COM111 Public Speaking OR SOC101 Intro to Sociology
Year 2 Fall	MAT-XX1 (<i>placement-dependent math course</i>) and/or Statistics BIO103/BIO104 Human Bio and Lab OR CIS110 Computer Applications	MAT-XX1 (<i>placement-dependent math course</i>) and/or Statistics ECO201 Microeconomics OR CIS110 Computer Applications
Year 2 Spring	LIT271 World Literature I CHM111 College Chemistry	MAT-XX2 (<i>next math course in sequence and/or Precalculus</i>) ECO202 Macroeconomics OR Choice of lab science course

NECC professors are excited to interact with high schoolers and to see these same young people flourish after graduating from high school, becoming full-time NECC students and earning their associate's degrees. LHS smooths the transition to college by "cohorting" classes. Rather than being mixed in with the general population of NECC students, early college students take classes together on the college campus and are taught by NECC faculty who have participated in an early college professional development program.



LHS early college student visting the Biogen Community Lab

The Secret to Success in the Lawrence Early College Partnership

While most education innovators recognize what's going well and what's going poorly as they implement demanding programs, lasting success depends on quickly analyzing the root causes of failures and making rapid midcourse corrections. Not all teams can do that.

It wasn't smooth sailing when LHS students took their first college math courses, but NECC's President Glenn and the team stepped in immediately to problem solve. "I know exactly where I was standing when I was talking through the disaster happening with early college students in our math classes," he recalled. "We needed to respond quickly to shore them back up and to put something in place so that that could not happen again. We used those couple of weeks in late August when high school is in session but college hasn't started for intensive math prep."²⁹ Today, math course pass rates are less worrisome, although they are still not where the early college team would like them to be—which would be every student passing with a C or better the first time around.

A second telling example of just-in-time and effective problem solving involves a challenge that plagues many students transitioning into college classes: After seeing teachers every day in high school, having their homework checked regularly, and getting help in study halls or from tutors when needed, high school students often get a rude awakening in their first college courses. They may not get any grades until midsemester, if then; professors may not notice whether they miss class for a few days; and professors aren't expected to reach out the instant a student falls behind. The early college team quickly saw that the LHS students needed swift feedback on whether they were meeting the expectations of their college professors. As a result, with faculty cooperation, the NECC early college team instituted an early-warning system.

When a student starts to struggle in a college course for any reason, professors send an alert through an electronic platform managed by the NECC IT department. The system asks why they generated this alert and requests

information such as the student's attendance rate and current grade. The alert populates in a spreadsheet reviewed daily by both LHS and NECC staff members. The LHS early college team then follows up directly with the student to address the issue. NECC professors who teach early college students agree to participate in this process when they sign on as early college professors, and the system is designed to make it easy and efficient to do so.

This alert system eliminates the previous challenge for LHS staffers of having too little information on student progress or finding out too late in the semester that a student was failing or about to drop out. Employing this just-in-time strategy, the Lawrence team has helped students overcome a wide range of obstacles and at the same time has been able to reinforce an important lesson: Find out where you stand, and don't be embarrassed to ask for help.

A Dedicated, Thoughtful Team With Student Success as the Goal

The critical component behind the success of Lawrence's early college program is the way the program is led and staffed. The team has included full-time staff members since the outset of planning for the early college program, illustrating the school's intentional dedication of resources.

Cynthia Paris, the superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools; Victor Caraballo-Anderson, the head of school at LHS; and the two college presidents are vocal about their commitment to early college. And while leadership from the top is important, it's the team on the ground that pulls it all off. At the colleges and the high school, three people lead the early college effort: Marcy Yeager, the executive director of PK-12 partnerships and international studies at NECC; Russell Olwell, the associate dean of the College of Education at Merrimack; and Kevin Dean, the humanities pathways supervisor at the high school. Also on the team are Leslie Peralta, the early college program manager, and Niurka Aybar, the early college and career pathway associate, who came to LHS from NECC. Both young women grew up in Lawrence, graduated from college, and came back to help the youth of their community thrive. Both work full time on



LHS early college students celebrating the early college grant with then-Mayor Dan Rivera and Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker

the early college team and interact with their counterparts at the colleges. They collaborate with Myrna Percibal, assistant director of Secondary-Postsecondary Linkages at NECC, and with Meredith Fitzsimmons, senior administrator at Merrimack, to ensure that all students' needs are met.

Over the years, the team has developed and committed to shared values: the use of data, the careful tracking of student progress, and the ability both to step back to see the big picture and to plan the path forward. The team meets weekly to track student progress by reviewing input to the early-warning system, student grades, and teacher and professor reports. These meetings result in immediate action steps to ensure that each student gets exactly

the help they need to stay on track and succeed. At a recent retreat, the team took some time to dig even more deeply into the data; the outcome was a plan to strengthen, intensify, and better tailor guidance and advising to each student's needs.

As Kevin Dean recounted in an interview, the most significant outcome was what the team is calling Support System 3.0. "The team designed a multiyear, multitiered system of student support that places transferable postsecondary skills (self-advocacy, communication, collaboration, and more) at the center of the student experience," Dean said. "Each cohort of early college students—juniors and seniors—will have support services tailored to their developmental stage."³⁰

And here's the bottom line: The Lawrence team recognizes that students need support to stay on track in such a demanding program. They've developed a strong, consistent program culture where failure is not an option. At team meetings, their enthusiasm for getting it right, their respect for each other, and their optimism and good humor are clear as they solve

problems and take on the next set of refinements with the goal of all students attaining college credit prior to high school graduation. Yeager, executive director of PK-12 partnerships and international studies at NECC, described her vision for what she calls "the mindset flip" to her colleagues on the early college team:

“Five years from now, as students enter Lawrence High School, early college is going to be laid out as a pathway option for every student. Ninth grade is your taste of early college: What is a career pathway? In 10th grade, we integrate those critical student success skills. Every student is college-capable; whether they’re going to college while they’re in high school, right after, or a few years down the road, they all know they can do it because they’ve done a chunk of it before. That’s my big vision. It’s an aligned pathway with progressively more content-heavy courses, but it’s also a model where we help students become independent learners. So, by the end of their senior year as they’re transitioning into a fifth year and earning their associate’s degrees, we’re letting go of their hands. We’re still hovering, but we’re letting go.”

Conclusion

Reflecting on promising early college data released in August 2020, Riley noted that “state-designated early college programs are an important way to show students that they are capable of doing college-level work.”³¹ The encouraging data continues to roll in, and thus there must be moments when Riley thinks back to the risk he took in choosing early college as the next step for Lawrence and sees how well it is working out. Lawrence students are certainly proving that they succeed in college-level courses.

In just under a decade, the young college-educated population in Lawrence has grown, bringing their skills, knowledge, and commitment to the city and changing its trajectory. Jessica Andors is the longtime executive director of Lawrence Community Works, a community-development organization working with thousands of Lawrence families to invest in neighborhoods, build affordable housing, construct playgrounds, and preserve the city’s many assets. Andors spoke to the resilience and promise of the Lawrence community and residents: “This is such an amazing and vibrant city The pandemic has set it back, but with the progress we’ve made and the assets we have, the community is absolutely going to bounce back.”³²

Endnotes

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