

Maximizing College Readiness for All Through Parental Support

Jack Leonard

Abstract

The lack of college readiness skills is a national problem, particularly for underachieving high school students. One solution is to offer authentic early college coursework to build confidence and academic momentum. This case study explored a partnership between a traditional, suburban high school (600 students) and a community college to maximize college credit accumulation for students from the middle academic quartiles and asked, “How can parental support help increase college readiness skills for academically average students?” The author analyzed data from planning meeting notes, student surveys, and interviews with leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Over three years, 74 students averaged 9.4 college credits/year with a 91% success rate. Parent engagement was indispensable for recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional guidance; the financial contribution actually seemed to stimulate parental involvement.

Key Words: case study, college credits, readiness, high school, dual enrollment, Massachusetts, parent participation, parent–school relationships, partnerships in education, program evaluation, school support, underachievement

Introduction and Problem Statement

In recent years, there has been growing concern that high school graduates are not ready for college, despite 25 years of standards-based reform (Conley,

2005; Kirst, 2008). This is particularly true for students who are not in the top academic quartile in their high school. Increasingly, these students are headed for college, but too many fail the college placement exams and waste valuable time and money while taking non-credit-bearing remedial courses.

Currently, nearly 20% of students entering four-year colleges and over 50% of those entering two-year colleges require at least one remedial course (Complete College America, 2012). Rather than increasing graduation prospects, remediation is often the first step to dropping out. For students who start in remediation, only about one third earn a bachelor's degree in six years and less than 10% graduate from community colleges within three years (Complete College America, 2012). In Massachusetts, where this study was situated, the department of education tracked 2005 public high school graduates and found that 65% of those who enrolled in community colleges required at least one remedial course, versus 22% at state colleges and 8% at state universities (Plummer & Nellhaus, 2008).

College is expensive, and any approach that will reduce the cost of college is welcomed by parents and students. Dropping out of college is even more expensive, leaving many students with loan obligations, fewer job prospects, and a lifetime of lower earnings. Dropping out is also expensive for our country. Researchers estimate that college students who matriculated in 2002 but never graduated cost the nation \$3.8 billion in lost income and \$730 million in lost federal and state taxes for just one year (Schneider & Yin, 2011).

This paper reviews various approaches to improving college readiness for all students and asks the question: How can parental support help increase college readiness skills for academically average students? The author presents a case study of a partnership between a Massachusetts high school and a nearby state community college.

Agassiz High School (AHS, a pseudonym) is the sole high school in a small suburban Massachusetts town. In 2012, 7% of the 644 students in Grades 9–12 were non-white, 21% came from low-income families, 14% had individual education plans, and less than 2% were limited English proficient (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2012b). On state assessments, AHS placed near the middle of suburban high schools and boasted an 85% graduation rate. In June 2010, there were 149 graduates; 62% signaled intentions to attend a four-year college, 32% declared plans for a two-year college or trade school, and 6% were headed for work or the military (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2012a). Within 16 months, however, only 121 students (81% of the graduates) were attending a two- or four-year postsecondary institution.

Agassiz is not a college town. In 2009, 37.2% of the adult population (25 years or older) had a bachelor's degree, close to the state average of 37.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). School surveys indicated that parents of the first early college cohort averaged 2.43 years of post-secondary education; several of the students were first-generation college students. This is not a wealthy town, where the estimated median household income in 2009 dollars was \$63,545, compared to a statewide figure of \$64,425 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The high school offered six Advanced Placement courses and several dual enrollment courses in a partnership with New England Community College (NECC, fictitious name), a nearby two-year institution in the Commonwealth's network of two- and four-year public colleges. AHS was a top feeder school for NECC, sending 25 to 45 graduates on to study there each year.

Review of the Literature

This review will define college readiness, review the strengths and weaknesses of various college readiness interventions, and then examine psychological and environmental factors which affect readiness and challenge our definition. David Conley, a national expert on college readiness, offered this definition:

College readiness can be defined operationally as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program. “Succeed” is defined as completing entry-level courses at a level of understanding and proficiency that makes it possible for the student to consider taking the next course in the sequence or the next level of course in the subject area. (Conley, 2007, p. 5)

Conley offered four categories of college readiness skills: content knowledge, cognitive strategies such as analysis and problem-solving, academic behaviors such as time management, and contextual skills and knowledge, which would familiarize the student with a campus environment (Conley, 2008).

Educators employ a variety of strategies to increase college readiness, which are listed here from least to most expensive. One general approach, which addresses content knowledge and cognitive strategies, is to improve the alignment of middle/high school and college curricula. A second approach is to build in extra programs, such as college success courses that teach academic behaviors, along with college fairs, college tours, guest speakers, or summer experiences on college campuses that help students gain contextual skills and knowledge. The advantage of both approaches is that they are inexpensive and everyone

can participate. However, many schools now use these approaches with marginal effectiveness.

The third general approach (and the focus on this paper) is to melt the boundary between the high school and college so students participate in authentic early college coursework while still in high school. High school students with a “front-load” of 12 to 20 college credits gain academic momentum and are more likely to enter college right after graduation, enroll on a full-time basis, and complete in four years (Adelman, 2006; Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007). Indeed, one recent study reinforced this third approach, finding that effective college readiness interventions push high school students to enroll right after graduation, on a full-time basis, while addressing financial aid challenges, particularly with students headed to two-year colleges (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011). Jobs for the Future, which spearheaded the national Early College High School Initiative, described four kinds of early college coursework:

1. Examination-based college credit, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses and International Baccalaureate programs.
2. School-based credit programs, such as “concurrent enrollment,” where college courses are taught at the high school by high school faculty under the supervision of college professors.
3. College-based credit programs, such as dual enrollment (DE), where students take college courses taught by college faculty (often at the high school).
4. Virtual online college-credit courses. (Hoffman, 2003, p. 6)

All four alternatives were utilized in the Agassiz partnership; these options were a key to maximizing college credit accumulation for many students.

In many high schools, the early college options are only accessed by students in the top academic quartile for whom college success is not really a question (Abell, 2007). This ignores the needs of the “forgotten middle” students (Delisio, 2009; Swanson, 2005) who come from the middle academic quartiles and often manifest these traits:

- Consistent school attendance
- Seldom get in trouble
- Never sign up for Honors classes
- Earn C-grades in classes that lack rigor
- Sit in the back of the classroom
- Rarely raise a hand or do anything to draw attention
- Have overworked parents with little time to advocate for children
- May move on to a community college and quit after a few courses
- May be first in the family to attend college (Delisio, 2009; Swanson, 2005)

As Swanson says, “Their parents and teachers are content that they are making it through and no alarm bells are going off. They constitute a large part of the middle two quartiles of students. They’ll graduate, but won’t be prepared for college” (2005, p. 31). Such students are unlikely to volunteer for rigorous early college coursework. How does one get these students, who don’t even take Honors courses, to enroll in college coursework and complete 12 to 20 credits while still in high school? The early college high school movement is addressing these students, but the programs are small in size and number and financial support is uncertain (Hoffman, 2009; Webb, 2004).

The lack of attention to student choice is a shortcoming of the Conley schema. Conscientiousness, for example, “as measured by such traits as dependability, perseverance through tasks, and work ethic” is a top predictor of college success (Sparks, 2010, para. 7). Students who are not conscientious are unlikely to succeed on their own in rigorous coursework and thereby gain self-confidence to enter college. Adelman wrote, “One begins to see why student choice (and the responsibility inherent in student choice) emerges...as the principal challenge to academic advising and counseling from secondary through postsecondary education” (2006, p. 80). This highlights the importance of strong support mechanisms from guidance counselors, parents, and peers. This is particularly important for the underachieving “middle” students.

A second problem with early college options is that they are expensive. State support across the country is spotty and foundation funding is unsustainable (Webb, 2004). Many programs share the cost between the university, school district, and parents. In fact, parental contribution is widespread. For example, “nearly two-thirds of all higher education institutions offering dual enrollment reported that students or their parents paid at least a portion of tuition, and 20 percent reported that families assumed the full cost of tuition” (Abell, 2007, p. 19). College readiness is a partnership among many stakeholders.

In fact, some scholars argue that Conley’s schema does not sufficiently address complex environmental factors that can reduce college completion rates, such as tuition costs, lack of supportive social networks, and the unfamiliarity faced by first-generation college students (Hernandez, 2011). Academic preparation is only one piece of the complex puzzle:

Multiple research studies have shown the following to be the strongest predictors of college attendance and completion, particularly for minority and low-income students: academic preparation, social support, access to information, parental involvement, and knowledge about college and financial aid. (Martinez & Klopot, 2005, p. 5)

Therefore, effective college readiness interventions should address more than just the high school student, but include the family, counselors, and other relevant social networks.

Rationale

This review suggests that parents are a critical component in the development of college readiness, particularly for students in the middle academic quartiles. Parents provide social support around student choice when children are wavering before the daunting task of getting ready for college. Parents can promote conscientiousness and help in the development of dependability, perseverance, and a work ethic. Parents can join with students in learning about financial aid and paying the price of early college coursework. Parents can push their children to enroll in college and take a full load right after high school graduation. Parents play an indispensable role; many want their children to go to college, want them to succeed, and want to save money at the same time. Most college readiness research reports focus on the student and the schools, but not parents. There are two exceptions. Large school districts often include parents as one partner in an early warning system designed to flag at-risk students (see, for example, Fairchild et al., 2011). These programs catch students in danger of dropping out of the pipeline, but they do not promote specific college readiness skills. The other line of literature discusses the early college high school movement, but ignores the large number of traditional American high schools. This paper considers the role of parents in recruitment, enrollment, and support of academically average students in an early college program in a traditional high school.

Methodology

In 2007, a high school and local community college decided to expand their partnership to seriously address college readiness for all students. A planning team consisting of two high-level college administrators, the district superintendent and director of curriculum, the high school principal, and one guidance counselor met semimonthly for over two years. The author of this article joined the team as a participant–observer and engaged scholar. This inside view offered a level of data detail that would not be available to an outsider. The college readiness planning team began their work with these goals:

- More AHS students will earn college credit before high school graduation.
- More AHS students will take AP courses in their junior and senior years.

- More AHS students will attend college after high school graduation.
- Fewer AHS students will need remedial coursework at college.
- More AHS students will complete a college certificate or degree within four years of graduating from high school.

Arguing that the top quartile students were already in line to meet the college readiness goals, the planning team decided to target the two middle academic quartiles and to begin when the students were in tenth grade. They knew these students would need extra supports. This new, three-year college readiness program used a learning community model where a cohort of students took the same courses together each day. Students took a concurrent enrollment American Literature class, taught by a regular AHS teacher, that was aligned with the equivalent NECC English course. They also took two dual enrollment courses: a U.S. History course and a College Success Seminar taught by regular NECC professors (who taught the same courses on the college campus at night). The three course curricula were integrated, providing a seamless 84-minute learning experience for students each day at the high school. The integrated learning community is a common freshmen year college strategy to promote student retention (Spurling, 2009).

The faculty members met weekly to coordinate the work, balance the assignments, and discuss the progress of the students. Because both bargaining units were always present in the classroom, there were no union grievances. The College Success Seminar, which emphasized planning, time management, how to be a self-directed learner, and college-level reading and writing skills, proved to be a critical component. With 84 minutes every day, the cumulative hours for each course were actually twice the normal college allotment. In this way, students had far more time and support to complete reading and writing assignments, while the content rigor of the courses was equal to or even greater than the college campus versions. The course integration, College Success Seminar, extended time, and extra tutoring proved to be essential to helping academically average tenth grade students succeed.

The costs of the Early College program were shared by the college, high school, and parents, with parents paying only \$600/year (Leonard, 2013). In 2013, regular tuition and fees for state residents at NECC were \$157/credit in addition to registration fees; Early College families would have paid \$1400 to \$1800 for similar course loads at the college, so there were considerable savings. Families with financial need received assistance through a local community education foundation, which agreed to support the program. The sophomore year was the most expensive year because of the two college faculty members and extra classroom supports. As the planning team looked ahead to the junior and senior year experiences, they found various ways to contain costs

while increasing the college experience. Junior year students again took a year-long integrated course of American Literature II and U.S. History II, again with one AHS instructor and one NECC instructor, but this time without the college success course. Students also took a college dual enrollment class at the high school each semester (Studio Art and Environmental Science), so they earned 12 credits by the end of the year. Total scheduled hours were less than the sophomore year, but still more than regular college, and the total cost was still \$600/student/year. NECC also sold other dual enrollment courses during the regular school year and in the summer for ambitious students who wanted to earn more credits. In the senior year, the integrated learning community was dissolved. Students took the standard freshmen college English Composition course in the fall (three credits), taught by an NECC instructor at the high school for \$600. (This course was actually more expensive than the campus version, but parents saved substantially on the three-year cost of 24 or more credits.) Then, families could choose to purchase dual enrollment courses, virtual online courses, or even regular classes on the NECC campus during the second semester of the senior year. In this way, the gradual transition to an authentic college experience was complete.

This article previously described three general approaches to college readiness, which included curriculum alignment and extracurricular orientation experiences. The high school used elements of each approach. Curriculum alignment was addressed in several ways. Each concurrent enrollment course required articulation between the high school and equivalent college courses. In addition, the integrated learning community provided an opportunity for high school instructors to teach side-by-side with college faculty, thus comparing and matching expectations and rigor. The planning team also increased the number of extracurricular orientation experiences for high school students. The tenth grade College Success Seminar was an important addition, and there were also annual college fairs and tours (of both NECC and other campuses). Students in the Early College program were fully enrolled as NECC students, receiving student identification cards and access to the campus library, tutoring services, and online learning platform (Blackboard), thus addressing contextual skills and knowledge. Students also received a regular, indistinguishable college transcript.

Originally, the high school had one college readiness track which included Honors courses followed by AP and dual enrollment courses and was utilized by top quartile students. The new Early College program was targeted toward academically average students who did not take Honors courses, effectively opening a second pathway toward college and expanding overall college readiness in the student body.

Over three years, 74 Agassiz sophomores enrolled in three college courses as part of their regular school day. These students were recruited as freshmen from the two middle academic quartiles as measured by their grade point average (GPA). Their freshmen transcripts revealed B–C grade averages in primarily non-Honors courses. Comparison with a nonexperimental control group of students from the same two quartiles revealed no statistical difference in gender, race, socioeconomic status, or student achievement as measured by GPA and state assessments ($p < .05$). All 74 students passed the college courses and earned nine credits; many continued with the Early College program in their junior and senior years, accumulating as many as 35 college credits before graduation. After three years of program operation, Early College students successfully earned 1196 college credits (see Table 1), averaging 9.4 college credits/year with an overall 91% success rate (Leonard, 2012).

Table 1. Characteristics, Entering Early College Students & Credit Accumulation by June 2012

	Class of 2012	Class of 2013	Class of 2014
Original Number Grade 10	31	22	21
Average age	15 years, 8 mo.	15 years, 3 mo.	15 years, 7 mo.
Race	87% Caucasian	95% Caucasian	90% Caucasian
Gender	61% boys	59% boys	57% boys
Low income	16%	18%	24%
GPA*	2.80	2.88	2.94
Students with disabilities	0	5%	19%
ELLs	0	0	10%
Credits accumulated per student by June 2012	21.74	15.54	8.57

*GPA was based on a 4.3 scale for non-Honors courses, where 2.6 was equivalent to a C+ and 2.9 to a B-.

This study used an explanatory case study methodology to answer the question, “How can parental support help increase college readiness skills for academically average students?” Given the lackluster report cards of these freshmen students, school leaders wanted to better understand how they were inspired to complete a year of college while still in high school. Case study is an appropriate research methodology when investigating programs that are considered novel, unique, or innovative. The limited generalizability is balanced by the opportunity to explore fresh approaches to tough educational problems (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002).

The research methodology was crafted jointly by the planning team. Data instruments and collection methods included:

1. Student surveys used with all 74 students
2. Semistructured interviews used with small focus groups of students ($n = 48$; students were selected to represent the full range of academic outcomes)
3. Semistructured interviews used with parent focus groups; parents volunteered to be interviewed ($n = 25$)
4. Semistructured interviews with all early college teachers ($n = 7$), three guidance counselors, the school principal, district director of curriculum, and the college dean who attended the planning team meetings
5. Minutes of the semimonthly planning team meetings
6. Document artifacts, including financial reports and the AHS–NECC memorandum of agreement

Meetings and interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and reviewed with participants for accuracy. Survey data were statistically analyzed for mean responses and variability using Excel spreadsheets. Using an explanation building mode of analysis (Yin, 2002), qualitative data were analyzed through the method of constant comparison using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (*Weft*). All case studies present validity concerns; in our case, the multiple data sources provided rich triangulation. In addition, the planning team reviewed the results to verify the accuracy of details.

Results

Parent Engagement

Parents were an important partner in the Early College program. In the eyes of some, they were not particularly engaged with the program. For example, the Grade 10 and 11 instructors told me that no more than 20% of the parents were “actively engaged in their child’s education,” which implied that most of the parents did not attend parent–teacher nights and did not communicate with the school by telephone, email, or in person. On the other hand, there was ample evidence that the Early College program was working because of quiet, behind-the-scenes parental attention. Parents played an indispensable role in three main areas, which will be presented subsequently: recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional guidance.

Recruitment and Enrollment

Parents had different reasons for enrolling their child. The following conversation illustrates how parents aimed for an appropriate challenge for their

child and perceived the relative difficulty of the Early College program. Their daughter had taken a few Honors classes in freshmen year.

The Honors classes were causing a little stress in the house. One of the classes, she had to be tutored, she had difficulty, and the college prep classes, I don't think, were quite hard enough, so we thought that Early College would be an excellent in-between. Plus it would give her some skills and credits for college—how could you go wrong? And maybe teach her some skills that she'll be able to carry forward.

(Other evidence from students and teachers indicated that the work load in the Early College classes was actually *greater* than Honors courses, but the multiple student support strategies made success more attainable.) Another parent was attracted to the College Success Seminar: "What pushed me to enroll her—not that she was very easy going at all—was the Success Seminar. Because what we see with our daughter is she lacks focus."

The researcher also asked the students, "Who were the people who influenced you to join the Early College Program?" Most students pointed to a parent (85%) and/or a guidance counselor (80%), which underscored the importance of both roles when it came to enlisting young students who were not academically proficient for this challenging program.

Almost all students agreed that their parents encouraged them to enroll. However, they had mixed reactions when asked if their parents *made* them enroll; in fact, there was more variation in responses to this statement than anywhere else on the surveys. The interviews confirmed the strong parental role. For example, one parent admitted,

I was the one who brought it to her attention, whether or not she had actually heard of it through [school], but I broached the subject with her. She was open to it. It wasn't like she was jumping up and down. There was a little apprehension. "Early College success will help you in the long run. You might as well try it. It can only help; it won't hurt."

Another parent stated, "Ours was a joint decision," and this interview revealed the collaborative decision-making process:

I guess we wanted to make sure she wanted to do it first. At first she was a little skeptical. We wanted to challenge her a little bit. She came home with the information and said, "Should I do this?" and then we came to the [spring] Open House and heard all about it and brought her with us and she said, "I think I can do this."

Other students also commented on the joint decision-making process:

Ultimately I had the final decision on whether I wanted to or not. I think it was a good choice taking this.

My mom really wanted me to, but I wanted to more than she wanted me to. Just because I really like the idea of college credits.

It was really half and half. I'm always up for trying something new. At the time, I heard about the program, and I thought, you know, it might be a really good experience. Because it's a year in a cohort, not just a quarter or a semester, so there's obviously going to be a lot more getting done.

Um, my mom definitely, she found out about it first, and she told me a lot about it and that she was interested in it, and she definitely wanted to. I guess the idea that colleges saw it as you took a college course—that really attracted me, because I thought they'll love that. So that's what attracted me the most, but she was definitely pushing on it. She wanted me to, but in the end it was my decision, like I did agree with her.

In the middle of the year, however, when the work was difficult and students were struggling, they were more likely to “remember” who pushed them to enroll. A junior-year teacher commented:

A lot of them don't seem to be motivated by grades. It seems like the drafting of this may have been done, in part, by parental pressure, because the kids are saying, “I'm doing this because my mom made me do it!”

As these cases illustrate, parents played a significant role in helping 15-year-olds make a sensible decision with long-ranging effects. Earning college credits and saving on future tuition bills were not the only motivators for enrollment but certainly were a background factor. Parents seemed more likely to be asking, “What's the best step to help my child succeed this year?”

Financial Support

The obvious way in which parents played an indispensable role was in paying the \$600 annual tuition fee. Without their contribution, the program would not have been sustainable. Most parents shouldered the entire fee, although a few seniors indicated they paid as much as two-thirds of the cost themselves. Despite the cost, most parents viewed the expense as a real bargain on the cost of college, as this father said:

I'm thinking about real tuition in the future. This is a really good deal. Joe's taken some summer classes, and I know what they cost. I know future tuition costs will be much, much more. This is money in the bank for me.

This was not a wealthy suburb, and the cost was a real burden for many, as this father confessed:

Dan and his mother, who has medical issues like me, so that puts a big strain on me. So, for me, it was really, really hard, and the school helped out. Otherwise, Dan wouldn't be doing this. He works part-time (two days a week), which is a lot in light of all his other activities.

These students were not academic all stars. In their junior year, a few students failed the college courses, which was a serious financial blow. One student admitted, "My mom wanted me to switch out this year. It's like \$600, and I'm failing it!" Nevertheless, most parents supported the program throughout the three years of enrollment despite the academic ups and downs. Their financial contribution also spurred other kinds of support, as this final section will show.

Emotional Guidance

There were many support mechanisms built into the Early College program to ensure that students would succeed, such as the College Success Seminar and the learning community model (Leonard, 2010). Some support mechanisms were designed to engage the parents. For example, the high school used an online program which alerted parents when a student's grade slipped below a designated point. In addition, the college faculty used the online learning platform, which provided the syllabus, assignments, and grade book for student and parent review. The Early College instructors refused to accept a failing grade on any assignment (the "no-fail" rule, Leonard, 2010). Students were required to make up missing work and to repeat assignments until they succeeded. All the instructors followed a policy of contacting parents by email whenever a homework assignment was missing. This was surprisingly effective. Given their \$600 investment in the program, parents were more than willing to apply pressure from home, especially in Grade 10. In effect, the school experienced an unprecedented level of engagement between faculty and parents. This was an unexpected development, which reinforced the decision to require all parents to pay some portion of the tuition with future cohorts.

At one springtime recruitment meeting, some parents who did not enroll in the program openly questioned why the advantages of the program, such as the extra supports and the "no-fail" rule, were not freely available to every student at AHS. In short, they wanted to know why strategies that were obviously successful were not enforced in every classroom. The AHS principal offered two explanations. First, the hard fact was that the early college parents were paying for these supports. For example, the College Success course, as desirable as it would be for all the high school sophomores, cost over \$10,000 per year. The second reason was harder to explain: Parent engagement was unreliable at AHS. The principal recalled past conversations with some parents about incomplete homework: "The trouble is, when we give the students a zero, you

won't make them keep writing. You just let them off! We call you, and you tell us not to call any more." On the other hand, the early college parents did support the faculty demands and so their children succeeded. Either the program unwittingly selected more engaged parents and/or the added factor of tuition payments stirred them to get more engaged.

There were many signs of the important role that parents played in helping their children succeed in the Early College program. The students often wanted to quit because, realistically, the work was hard. Parents had to bolster their children. One daughter said, "It's so hard; it's so hard!" and the parent told me, "She knows the work is more difficult. 'This is preparing you for the next level; you're required to do it, and of course it's going to be hard.' So, being the mother of the child, we have our moments."

As the students got older, the parental pressure was more subtle, as this father of a junior student recalled after a particularly poor report card:

I said that if that was the best he could do, then I would accept that, but if that was not the best he could do (and I knew he could) then "all you're doing is cheating yourself. And you're the one that's going to pay for it."
He said he understood.

Another junior student said, "They still agree with the program and want me in it, but when I got a C, I had to talk with my mom about why it happened." However, most students succeeded academically and enjoyed consistent parental enthusiasm:

As long as I get good grades, they're fine.

My dad's all for it. He loves it so....

My dad wants me to keep doing it and wants me to take a few classes over the summer, too.

Parents were quick to notice the impact of the Early College program on students' study habits. The author asked parents if they noticed any outcomes from the College Success Seminar.

Father: She learned more how to study; last year she had way too many papers, all over the place....I think she's studying a little smarter. She really gets annoyed when she studies the wrong thing.

Mother: She's becoming more organized.

This parent also noticed the new study habits in her daughter:

Before, she was a C–D student and now she's A–B. Last year, homework, it was a nightmare. She and I fought about homework, about her Honors class, and she pretty much was constantly stressed and just, "Oh,

I have so much homework!” and this year I teach, and I pick her up around 4:00, and she goes to the library, she’s doing her homework, so it does take her longer to process and to get written output out, but she’s able to time manage. She knows, “This is what I need to do at school, and this is what I need to do at home, because I can do it.” She’s way more organized in the fact that she’s writing everything down. Last year she wrote it down; this year she writes it down and color codes it.

One very encouraging sign was that the Early College program definitely stimulated college-going conversations, beginning in tenth grade. Here is a sample of a mother recalling her conversation with her daughter:

This is getting you ready. This is what it’s going to be like, no matter what college you go to. You’re going to be spending hours doing homework. And this is the reality of it. So learn what you can; learn the study habits they’re teaching you. And not going to college is not an option.... You will have to pay. You will be in debt. We’re not doing the whole thing. No way; we can’t.

Parents were able to attend to the immediate needs of their children without taking their eyes off the long-range benefits of the program.

Previously, this paper presented the case of a parent who removed her daughter from Honors-level courses where she was struggling and enrolled her in the Early College program instead. This parental attention, which seemed to ask, “Where is my daughter most likely to succeed this year?” could also have a negative impact on the Early College program. Three years of research demonstrated that the added rigor of the Early College courses had a depressing effect on students’ GPA compared to the control group. While both groups improved their GPA from the freshmen to sophomore year, the experimental group improved less. A few parents and students with strong college aspirations pulled out of the Early College program after one year to attempt Honors courses instead (which carried a greater weight in GPA calculations). This student discussed his plans for switching to the Honors program:

It’s better for my GPA too. I’m really looking to raise that, and, um, one of the big reasons that I joined was to get the big experience of college, too, and kind of like, see myself grow. And now that I’ve done that one year, I feel more comfortable with it.

But, another student planned to reenroll and also revealed the parental influence: “I’m taking it next year. We talked about it because of my GPA, but she said the same thing, and you learn a lot more.” Either way, students were making good decisions that would boost their college readiness.

Discussion

Educators offer various solutions to the college readiness challenge. Course alignment, college success courses, and college orientation experiences all help. However, there is nothing like practice with the real thing to build confidence and high self-efficacy concepts (Bandura, 1997). For this reason, early college high schools are springing up all over the country. They tend to be small with uncertain financial support. The AHS–NECC Early College program was part of a traditional high school and, thanks to the parental contribution, was sustainable financially.

A review of the research literature suggests that college readiness is more than just a set of academic skills and knowledge but also depends upon student choice and student dispositions as well as familial and social networks (Hernandez, 2011; Martinez & Klopot, 2005). Too often, research on college readiness has overlooked the important role of the family, particularly with underachieving students. This case study found that parental engagement played an important role in recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional support.

Many parents were thinking ahead to college even when their children were not. When some parents realized their children were not ready for Honors courses, the Early College program was a welcome alternative to steer them toward college. Some parents preferentially enrolled their child in the Early College program because of the College Success Seminar. However, other parents avoided the Early College program for equally college-bound reasons. These parents were convinced that Honors courses, which carried greater weight in GPA calculations, were the most promising route forward. A few families even pulled out of the Early College program after one year because of the decelerating effect on cumulative GPA. Both groups of parents demonstrated engagement for college readiness.

Assuming responsibility for the cost of college is an important aspect of college readiness. The cost alone can keep some students from attending college, no matter how ready they are in other respects. Many high schools offer seminars on financial aid, and AHS was no exception, but the Early College program offered some real-world experience, too. The program prompted parents and students to discuss the costs early in high school. They shared the responsibility; parents paid while students worked hard to earn credits. In some cases, students paid also. The tuition cost was annual and could be met with monthly payments, just like “real” college. Conceivably, some Early College students might qualify for a complete college financial aid package after graduation, but most parents seemed to conclude that, based on their income and

their child's accomplishments, a full ride to college was not in the future. For them, the Early College program provided a money-saving discount.

Parents always face some school-related costs, which could include school supplies, lunch money, uniforms, transportation, or fees for sports. However, the historic tradition of free public education forbids K–12 schools from charging tuition for courses. In this respect, the early college program crossed new policy boundaries. As other concerned parents noticed during the recruitment meeting, the Early College families were purchasing special academic services. While American parents often pay for dual enrollment courses (as previously discussed; see Abell, 2007), they are less likely to pay for concurrent courses that are part of the regular school day.

Some parents in the Early College program partnered closely with teachers for their child's academic success. The school certainly made a greater effort to engage parents. The newness of the program meant that the guidance department and school administrators paid extra attention and were more likely to contact parents with their concerns. The Early College teachers adopted new ways to engage parents, including Blackboard and regular emails. The Early College parents were also more engaged than the average parent at AHS. No doubt, the Early College program selected concerned parents since families volunteered to enroll. However, the students claimed that the financial commitment also evoked additional parental attention. Most of the evidence for parental engagement came from the sophomore year. As students matured and the program became routine, parents seemed to relax and take a more hands-off attitude. This confirmed other studies which report that parental engagement changes over time from a focus on student behaviors to a concern for programmatic outcomes and future prospects (Catsambis & Garland, 1997). Not surprisingly, there were more failing grades in the junior and senior years.

Teachers often question parental engagement because they do not see the parents show up at traditional parent–teacher open houses. This case study demonstrated that parental engagement took many forms. From the freshmen year, the Early College parents were thinking about the best academic options for their children. They were ready to take on additional financial responsibilities to help their children get ready for college. They were engaged in conversations at home with their children about academic choices, student grades, schedules, college prospects, and the financial cost of college. Jeynes meta-analytic study reinforced the importance of less obvious forms of parent engagement for urban student achievement:

Subtle aspects of parental involvement such as parental style and expectations had a greater impact on student educational outcomes than some of the more demonstrative aspects of parental involvement such

as having household rules and parental attendance and participation at school functions. (Jeynes, 2007, p. 100)

Similarly, much of the parental support in this case study was behind-the-scenes but nonetheless crucial for student success and college readiness.

One of the strengths of this college readiness program was that it opened new pathways to students who wanted to consider college in their future, students who might easily be overlooked. First, there was the traditional route for top quartile students, which led through Honors courses, followed by some combination of AP and dual enrollment courses. This pathway was supplemented by the Early College program, which invited academically average students to also get ready for college. College readiness is increasingly important for all students. The Early College program, combined with strong parental engagement, opened the doors for underachieving students to get ready for college.

What about students who do not want to go to college? And what about the students in the lowest academic quartile? The President's blueprint for educational reform addressed both college and career readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). An increasing number of jobs, especially in the Commonwealth where health, biotechnology, computer technology, and finance dominate the market, require at least two years of college. The community colleges can well address this need. Other trades still require only a high school degree. Massachusetts provides regional vocational schools for some students. However, the AHS early college model could reasonably be paired with an early *trade* program that would involve partnerships with postsecondary trade or technical schools for construction jobs, health technicians, beauticians, or auto mechanics.

Case studies always present certain limitations. This researcher attempted to overcome internal validity issues through data triangulation; the voices of teachers, students, and parents offered multiple perspectives, which sharpened interpretations. The position as participant–observer threatened objectivity, but offered access to more data than would be available to an outside agency. Case study results are hard to generalize; nevertheless, the AHS–NECC Early College program is now being replicated in three other high school/community college partnerships in Massachusetts. The research studies emerging from this program will prove to be an informative and valuable addition to the college readiness literature.

References

- Abell, F. (2007). *A "jump start" on college: How early college access programs can help high school students in Baltimore City*. Baltimore, MD: Abell Foundation. Retrieved from http://abell.org/pubsitems/ed_dualenroll_607.pdf

- Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Attewell, P., Heil, S., & Reisel, L. (2011). Competing explanations of undergraduate non-completion. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(3), 536–559.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.
- Catsambis, S., & Garland, J. E. (1997). *Parental involvement in students' education during middle school and high school* (Report No. 18). Baltimore MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk
- Complete College America. (2012). *Remediation: Higher education's bridge to nowhere*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Conley, D. T. (2005). *College knowledge: What it really takes for students to succeed and what we can do to get them ready* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Conley, D. T. (2007). *Redefining college readiness*. Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center.
- Conley, D. T. (2008). Rethinking college readiness. *New England Journal of Higher Education*, 22(5), 24–26.
- Delisio, E. R. (2009). *Remembering, supporting, the "forgotten middle."* Retrieved from the Education World website: http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/chat/chat165.shtml
- Fairchild, S., Gunton, B., Donohue, B., Berry, C., Genn, R., & Knevals, J. (2011). *Student progress to graduation in New York City high schools: A metric designed by New Visions for Public Schools*. New York, NY: New Visions for Public Schools.
- Hernandez, H., Jr. (2011). *The transition from high school to college in Texas: Hispanic students on the U.S.-Mexico border redefining college readiness*. El Paso, TX: The University of Texas at El Paso.
- Hoffman, N. (2003). *College credit in high school: Increasing postsecondary credential rates of underrepresented students*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.
- Hoffman, N. (2009). *Bringing college to the high school: Ensuring college readiness and postsecondary success*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.
- Jeynes, W. H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Urban Education*, 42(1), 82–110.
- Karp, M. M., Calcagno, J. C., Hughes, K. L., Jeong, D. W., & Bailey, T. R. (2007). *The postsecondary achievement of participants in dual enrollment: An analysis of student outcomes in two states*. St. Paul, MN: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education.
- Kirst, M. W. (2008, Fall). Secondary schools and colleges must work together. *Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, 111–122.
- Leonard, J. (2010, April). *Taking dual enrollment deeper: Supports for the "forgotten middle" in a tenth grade classroom*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Leonard, J. (2012). *An early college program: Second-year outcomes 2010–2011*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.
- Leonard, J. (2013). Funding early college high school: Hold harmless or shared commitment. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 21. [publication pending]
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012a). *2010–11 plans of high school graduates report*. Malden, MA: Author. Retrieved January 2, 2012, from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012b). *School district profiles*. Malden, MA: Author. Retrieved August 28, 2012, from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

- Martinez, M., & Klopot, S. (2005). *The link between high school reform and college access and success for low-income and minority youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.
- Plummer, P., & Nellhaus, J. (2008). *Massachusetts school-to-college report, high school class of 2005*. Malden, MA: Massachusetts Board of Higher Education & Massachusetts Department of Education.
- Schneider, M., & Yin, L. M. (2011). *The high cost of low graduation rates: How much does dropping out of college really cost?* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
- Sparks, S. D. (2010). Experts begin to identify nonacademic skills key to success. *Education Week*, 30(15). Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/12/23/15aera_h30.html
- Sperling, C. (2009). *The Massachusetts community colleges developmental education best policy and practice audit: Final report*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Community Colleges Executive Office.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swanson, M. C. (2005, November 2). It's time to focus on the forgotten middle. *Education Week*, 25, 31, 33.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *American FactFinder*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved January 5, 2011, from <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *A blueprint for reform: The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Webb, M. (2004). *What is the cost of planning and implementing early college high school?* Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.
- Yin, R. K. (2002). *Case study research: Design and methods, Vol. 5*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jack Leonard was a teacher and principal in the Boston Public Schools from 1996 to 2008, where he learned the benefits and challenges of community partnerships. He is now an assistant professor in the Department of Leadership in Education in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where he teaches graduate level courses to aspiring educational leaders. He researches and writes about community partnerships and school leadership. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Jack Leonard, University of Massachusetts Boston, College of Education and Human Development, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125-3393 or email Jack.Leonard@umb.edu

Copyright of School Community Journal is the property of Academic Development Institute and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.