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## More students go for high school-college twofer

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College-level courses in Minnesota high schools used to be reserved for the top ranks of students, but that's changing as more students seek to cash in on programs that will save them on tuition bills later.

This week, Irondale High School in New Brighton is showing off a new partnership with Anoka-Ramsey Community College that offers students "the opportunity to earn a two-year associate degree for free -- all while still enrolled in high school."

With its new Early College program, Irondale will target the academic center of its student body for college-level courses held on its own campus.

"Traditionally, we've served our higher-achieving students quite well," said Principal Scott Gengler. "We believe we've served our middle well, but we didn't have clear pathways for their post-secondary success. It was really random acts of college readiness."

Some officials say such programs could feed the next expansion of the quickly growing "dual credit" options, where students get both high school and college credit for the same course, and play a big role in making students more prepared for college.

Irondale's focus on the middle "makes it such an ambitious, exciting program," said Larry Litecky, interim vice chancellor for academic and student affairs for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. He said such partnerships might be "the best way to communicate collegiate expectations to high school students and teachers."

### A shrinking gap

Participation in dual credit programs has swelled as the price of college has risen, a report out Monday by the Center for School Change finds, with the number of students of color growing at a faster rate.

The growth -- for example, 62 percent more students took an Advanced Placement (AP) exam in 2010-11 than did five years ago -- came despite a slight drop in Minnesota's total high school population.

AP classes are the most popular option; about 35,000 Minnesota students took at least one AP test last year. The second is Concurrent Enrollment, in which high schools partner with colleges to offer college credit on their high school campuses. To put it in perspective: More than seven times as many students participated in Concurrent Enrollment than took an International Baccalaureate (IB) exam in the 2010-11 school year, the report says.

The study notes a dramatic influx of students of color in all kinds of dual credit programs.

"This is, in many ways, a very encouraging report," said Joe Nathan, a co-author of the report and executive director of the Center for School Change, located at Macalester College.

"There is enormous and appropriate interest in Minnesota in increasing overall achievement and decreasing the achievement gap," he said. "We think this report documents that both things have happened."

The report goes on to recommend that "dual credit" courses be available to younger and perhaps less academically successful students. It notes a study of New York and Florida students that showed dual credit programs' "ability to raise the achievement of students not traditionally seen as successful in high school" -- men, low-income students and low-achieving students.



Irondale students Margarita Castorena, left, and Nate McGee worked on a math problem with teacher Michele Heim.

ONLINE: "Progress and Possibilities: Trends in Public High School Participation with Minnesota's dual Credit Programs, 2006-2011" by the Center for School Change at Macalester College  
[www.centerforschoolchange.org/publications/documents/progressandpo](http://www.centerforschoolchange.org/publications/documents/progressandpo)

Minnesota has approached its dual credit programs cautiously. Right now, MnSCU limits its Post-Secondary Enrollment Options to juniors in the upper one-third of their class and seniors in the upper one-half -- or those with the equivalent test scores.

#### Reaching the middle

Some high schools have used AP and IB courses to reach lower-achieving students with more rigorous courses. But Irondale's Early College program might be the first to expand Concurrent Enrollment to that population when it launches this fall.

Irondale's many AP courses have been aimed at the top 30 percent of students. But in recent years, the school has carefully broadened its AP enrollment, Gengler said.

Anoka-Ramsey is working with the high school, which is part of the Mounds View Public Schools, to build a two-year college curriculum, incorporating AP classes. The goal isn't to have all students complete a two-year associate's degree while still in high school, but soon, it will be possible.

Since he was 11, Nate McGee has drawn buildings. Now a freshman at Irondale, he hopes to become an architect.

He is excited about the Early College program, he said, because it will help him save money on some of the many credits he'll need for an architecture degree. McGee, who is from Chicago and now lives in New Brighton, would become the first person in his family to complete college. He hopes to get a scholarship.

"I just want to show my parents how hard I can work," he said, "to make them proud."

#### The next steps

The Center for School Change report recommends that policymakers consider opening up dual credit programs, on a limited basis, "to students who are not eligible under current guidelines."

Such a move could improve students' college readiness, "so you save money by earning college-level credits, but you also save money by reducing the likelihood of having to take remedial classes" as a college student, Nathan said.

A 2010 MnSCU report showed that 53 percent of Minnesota's class of 2008 enrolled in a Minnesota public college within two years of graduation; of those, 40 percent took at least one remedial course.

A big part of Irondale's program involves preparation for college-level courses. Many students will take "foundational" math and writing courses in ninth and 10th grade, paired with a "college seminar" on study skills.

"They're not going to put students in there who they have not thoroughly helped to succeed," said Michael Werner, Anoka-Ramsey's director of program development. "They've thought this through from sixth grade all the way to graduation."

Early on, teachers had questions, said Richard Rosivach, a teacher at Irondale. One of them: "Are students going to be able to do this?" he said. "Well, if we're purposeful about it, yes, they can."

Teacher Robert Reetz said that his "aha" moment came as he was mining data: "As you start putting names to this academic middle group, you begin to say, 'Oh, this would be a great opportunity for that student.'"

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