



Irondale's new college-in-high-school program to be on display at town hall with Arne Duncan

By Beth Hawkins | Published Thu, Jan 19 2012 9:30 am



Courtesy of Irondale High School Starting next fall, students at Irondale High School will have the opportunity to graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree.

Everybody knows graduation is what happens when a person has endured a certain amount of high school, right?

What if graduation were redefined not as the accumulation of a certain number of credits but as the point at which a young person was prepared, academically and in all other respects, to go on to college — and complete a degree?

At Mounds View Public Schools, educators are betting they know the answer: It would be nothing short of a paradigm shift.

Starting next fall, students at the district's [Irondale High School](#), located in New Brighton, will have on-site access to enough college-level classes offered in conjunction with Anoka-Ramsey Community College to graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree.

'Cradle to career' pathways

The school's [first-of-its-kind early college program \[PDF\]](#) will be on display Friday at a town hall meeting where U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Gov. Mark Dayton and state Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius will discuss "cradle to career" pathways for success.



Courtesy of Irondale High School

Earlier in the day, Duncan will visit another notable effort to promote lifelong learning, Minneapolis' Northside Achievement Zone. An 8-year-old effort to ensure that every child born in an 18-by-13 block area finishes school college-ready, [the zone last month won a \\$28 million federal Promise Neighborhoods grant](#).

Right now, 40 percent of Minnesota adults hold some post-secondary degree. By 2018, however, some 70 percent of jobs here are expected to require some education beyond high school. Adding to this widening skills gap, overall levels of educational attainment in the state are falling.

The upshot is clear. The achievement gap may get most of the ink, but Minnesota schools need to do a better job positioning students for college and career training.

Among the metro's top 10

To judge by socio-economic data, Mounds View is a long way from North Minneapolis. Serving students in Arden Hills, Mounds View, New Brighton, North Oaks, Roseville, Shoreview and Vadnais Heights, the district is among the metro area's top 10 academically.

With 1,600 students, Irondale is a perennial fixture on the top-high-school lists published by national magazines. A full 99 percent of ninth-graders say they plan to go to college, and more than 90 percent graduate.

But it, too, faces challenges in terms of preparing students for college. A troubling number enroll but don't finish, according to Irondale Principal Scott Gengler. Some are taken by surprise by the academic challenge, and some grow frustrated paying tuition to take prerequisites needed to get ready for coursework that counts toward a degree.

"We know we are sending kids to college who are not prepared to complete it," he said. "And we believe one of the best ways to ensure college readiness is to expose kids to college-level rigor [to] build up their skills."

There's nothing new about some high schoolers doing college-level coursework. Minnesota's top students have long been able to earn college credit by passing tests at the end of high-level International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses, attending classes at a local college or university or taking "dual-credit" courses at their home schools.

But those who do typically have been at the top of their classes and presumably already college-bound.

And there are a growing number of programs aimed at exposing low-income students and immigrants, who are much more likely to be the first members of their family to consider college, to higher education.

Applying lessons learned to middle of the class

Mounds View is taking lessons gleaned from working with both groups and applying them to the middle of the class, for whom finishing the work necessary to earn a diploma often does not equate to college readiness.

The highest achievers will be able to earn an associate's degree — tuition-free — while still in high school or to transfer the equivalent number of credits to the college of their choice. The middle of the pack, those in the 30th to 70th percent range, will get an idea how challenging college will be.

Coursework will not be watered down. Instead, Irondale students will have help from teachers who will have the backing and mentorship of Anoka-Ramsey faculty. High schoolers participating in early college will work with faculty to develop an individual four-year plan just as they would at a university.

All will graduate with enough foundational coursework and the confidence to complete a two- or four-year degree, even if some choose not to, said Gengler.

Most important, exposing kids to college work in ninth and 10th grades will exert downward pressure on middle grades.

A ninth-grader, 15-year-old Parth Patel is two or three years from the point where most students are encouraged to start getting ready for college. A math and science geek, his goal is an engineering degree from an Ivy League school. His parents can help some with tuition, and Patel expects to work. Determined, he has been taking every accelerated class he can squeeze in.

When Patel and his father looked at the early college materials Irondale sent home, they calculated he can bank enough credits to shave \$10,000 off the cost of a bachelor's degree. And he can start now, versus waiting for 11th grade, when other dual-credit programs start.

Free practice ACT tests

Other district initiatives will reinforce the focus. Last year Mounds View began offering the college admissions ACT test free in both its high schools during the school day to juniors. Not only does the trial run give kids a chance to bone up and try again, it gets younger students focused on qualifying for admission to the college of their choice.

Through the early college program, the district will administer a separate test to 10th graders that predicts ACT success.

The idea of talking about college — its value, accessibility, rigor and admissions requirements — often and early on is a common feature of so-called beat-the-odds schools that graduate virtually all of their impoverished students and send them to college.

The early college program will cost \$65,000, which is being paid for by funds from the North Suburban Integration School District, whose future

is far from guaranteed, and by compensatory revenue. If all goes well at Irondale, early college will be rolled out at the district's other school, Mounds View High School.

Will the experiment be one that Secretary Duncan, a fanatic when it comes to pushing states to copy innovations that work, urges educators everywhere to emulate? Irondale probably won't have to wait long for an answer.

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