Elkhart Central High School saves students $200K on college tuition in 1 semester through Early College, dual credit

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ELKHART — Hundreds of Elkhart Central High School students are attending college for free thanks to a program called Early College.

Well, they’re not actually “attending” college for free, but they are earning a year’s worth (or more) of college credits at Central with the support of their high school teachers and counselors.

Early College is an initiative from the Horizon Education Alliance that allows area high schools to partner with Ivy Tech Community College to offer college courses to high school students at no cost to the students. Some students are able to earn certificates or associate’s degrees at the same time as their high school diploma.

Principal Frank Serge said Central bought into the Early College program early on, and he’s ready to see how much it can expand in the future. It’s growth has already been explosive.

More than 250 students participated in a dual credit class last year, the first year that Central started implementing the Early College opportunity, and that number more than doubled to 580 this year — that’s more than 30 percent of the school’s total population.

All together, those students earned more than 1,700 dual credit hours. If you compare that to the cost of a credit hour at Indiana University, for example, of $113.16 per credit hour, it has saved those students nearly $200,000 in college tuition.

Although all students can enroll in dual credit classes if they meet certain requirements, such as passing an Accuplacer exam, Early College specifically targets first-generation students or at-risk students. Those students, about 60 per year, are invited to be part of an Early College cohort, where they will spend their final two years of high school taking solely dual credit courses.

Those students are invited into the school with their parents early in their career to learn about Early College and to sign a contract committing to the program.

“We tell them that we expect them to work hard, and we expect them to live up to our expectations.” Serge said. “We tell them not to sign up if they’re not committed. That’s not to say there won’t be any rough spots, because there will be. We get that, and we’ll help you through that.”

I spoke with a few of the students in the junior class Early College cohort during my visit to Central on Thursday morning, all of whom told me how much the program has helped them prepare for college and apply themselves more — both in academics and in other areas, like community service.

Junior Giovanni Parga said although he always tries to work through assignments on his own first — he said he knows at college there won’t always be a teacher there to walk him through the homework — he appreciates the support that the high school offers. A counselor at the school, Regina Roberson, is completely devoted to Early College students.

“It’s kind of like a home security system,” Parga said. “As soon as we’re going down, they alert us.”

Junior Tyanni Winters said she likes the support that Roberson offers. She enjoys stopping by the guidance office several times a week to talk through her plans after high school.

“I knew I always wanted to go to college and I always knew I wanted to be a lawyer,”
Winters said, “Early College helps me advance faster. I don’t have to waste a whole year in college taking the same classes that I already took in high school.”

Junior Breana Bushnell said Early College has taught her to take advantage of her time in high school to get ahead in college.

“College, it’s going to come a lot sooner than I think,” she said. “But I’m ready.”

This story is part of an ongoing series in which reporter Michelle Sokol plans to tour and report from all 55 schools in Elkhart County.
Follow education reporter Michelle Sokol on Twitter at @michelle_sokol.