

“It’s Kind of Different”

Student Experiences in Two Early College High Schools

By RONALD A. WOLK

The early college high school movement promises to make higher education more accessible and more affordable for underrepresented students. *It’s Kind Of Different* captures student, teacher, administrator, and parent perspectives on early college high school. It focuses on two of these new schools, Wallis Annenberg High School in Los Angeles, CA, and Dayton Early College Academy in Dayton, OH.

It’s Kind Of Different shows that early college high schools are making progress serving students who are underrepresented in higher education. They provide young people with a rigorous, college-level curriculum and the opportunity to earn two years of college credit or an Associate’s degree while obtaining their diploma.

Education expert Ronald A. Wolk outlines the strides that schools participating in the national Early College High School Initiative have made, drawing on the preliminary results of a long-term study led by Harvard researchers Karen Foster and Michael J. Nakkula. Based on surveys of and interviews with members of the early college high school community, Foster and Nakkula examined the academic and social development of students in these unique schools.

The key findings focus on several areas. In addition to an **intense commitment from students, faculty, and their partners**, early college high schools help:

- Low-income and first-generation college students form an “**educational identity**” that includes college in their future. “*I didn’t*

think I was cut out for college [but now] I know I can go to college and pass. . . . It’s because I’m learning more and I have more confidence in myself,” said a Dayton Early College Academy student.

- Once-struggling students thrive in a **challenging environment featuring caring relationships with faculty**. “*In here, you fall behind and they pick you, they help you. . . . They help you in everything, anything they can. . . . So that’s different. Like in the other high school they really don’t,*” said a student at Wallis Annenberg.
- Teachers and administrators foster an environment with an **emphasis on “figuring things out together,”** so that students gain a deep understanding of new learning by being active problem solvers rather than passive recipients of information. “*Here you really have to understand what you did wrong [to get a B grade] so you won’t ever make that again. . . . So it’s kind of different,*” said a Dayton student.

The stories in “*It’s Kind of Different*” are especially noteworthy because the two schools, located 2,000 miles apart, are quite different from one another and yet they are joined, though the national Early College High School Initiative, by a set of common principles and goals.

Both schools combine high school and college into a coherent educational program that helps to bridge the gap between graduating from high school and entering and succeeding in college. All “early college high schools” are small—usually fewer than 400 students—and located on or near a college campus.

Each school also benefits from assistance provided by a national organization: KnowledgeWorks Foundation assists Dayton Early College Academy; the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation works with the Wallis Annenberg High School. These two organizations and ten others are partners in the Early College High School Initiative, an innovative effort to create 170 schools, serving more than 65,000 youth, by 2008. To date, 67 early college high schools have opened in 24 states, with a combined enrollment of more than 12,000 students. The initiative is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, along with Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and a number of local funders.



It’s Kind of Different is a publication of Jobs for the Future.

To download *It’s Kind of Different*, go to:
www.jff.org/jff/kc/library/0264.

For printed copies, email info@jff.org.

For information on the
Early College High School Initiative, go to:
www.earlycolleges.org

