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Program offered at half college tuition rate

Expanding dual credit program creates excitement, opportunities for HCHS students getting a jump on college

When the Kentucky Board of Education voted recently to eliminate the Commonwealth Diploma at the end of the 2011-2012 school year for graduating seniors in the state, it came as no surprise to Harlan County educators.

In fact, Harlan County Schools and Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College have made great strides over the past three years to put in place a topnotch program to continue offering high levels of learning.

And local educators see the state board's action as an opportunity for the dual credit program in place to meet this goal through continued expansion.

"About three years ago we saw the Commonwealth Diploma being phased out," said Principal Bob Howard. "We were not looking at that in our pursuit of the dual credit program. However, it just came as a result of a higher need to challenge our students. The Commonwealth Diploma had run its course in the state."

Stephanie Reynolds, HCHS guidance counselor, agrees.

"When our high school opened three years ago, I think we had a vision to create a state of the art, cutting edge school," she said. "Part of that vision was the dual credit program. It was my hope to see that our students be given every advantage and opportunity that we could offer. Though the Commonwealth Diploma program offered many Advanced Placement learning opportunities, I think today's student requires more."

Howard said HCHS has an entire curriculum devoted to dual credit, while most schools offer only a course or two. We are the envy of many school systems around us due to our dual credit offerings. I think our dual credit program is the jewel of our high school."

Reynolds said students themselves had vision and even indicated what direction might be best for them.

"So many of our students wanted the opportunity to begin working toward college credit while they were still high school students," she said. "The dual credit program was a good answer to their needs."

Reynolds has witnessed countless students gain college hours with "a confidence in being able to be successful at the post secondary level. "

Kathyrine Olivia Marsee jump started her college experience through dual credit, graduating from high school with 16 college hours.

"I absolutely loved the fact that I could take college classes in high school," she said. "They helped me tremendously. They also helped my family with college expenses because they only had to pay half price for the classes. That is amazing."

While she is majoring in nursing at SKCTC this fall, she plans to transfer to a university to pursue a career as a nurse practitioner.

"I would definitely recommend dual credit classes," she said. "It is such a great opportunity to be able to get a head start on your college career while still in high school."

Brent Roark, assistant superintendent of Harlan County Schools, noted that the most recently released data shows that 59 percent of Harlan County High School students are attending college after graduating from high school. This is up from 39 percent the previous year.

"I attribute this positive increase to the dual credit program," said Roark. "The dual credit program allows students to see that college can be a reality for them. Students who never dreamed of college now have the chance to expand their opportunities for their education and future employment."

"I think the dual credit program is a great asset for our high school, and most importantly for our students," said Reynolds.

Dr. Bruce Ayers, SKCTC president, said, "We are excited about expanding opportunities for students attending Harlan County High School. Our new agreement offers students the opportunity to enroll in college courses at half the regular cost. Our work with Harlan County High School has proven to be an excellent partnership that has greatly benefited the students of Harlan County."

During the 2010-2011-school year, there were 351 "seats" taken in dual credit classes offered at HCHS through SKCTC. There were 188 students taking one or more classes at the high school, while 143 students were attending dual credit courses in various vocational programs at the Harlan campus of SKCTC.

As a result of the program's success, 60 possible college hours are now available to HCHS students at half of the college tuition cost. These classes, along with their corresponding college class number include Web Page Design/IMD 232, Networking Cisco Academy I and II/IT 120 and IT 122, Networking Cisco II and III/IT 220 and IT 222, English IV/Eng 101, Physics I/DIT 100, Honor Physics/PHS 171, US History/His 109, Psychology/PSY 100, Crafts (Photography)/VCM 100 and VCA 120, Appalachian Studies/Hum 202 and 203, Advanced Computer Applications/CPU 150 and Advanced Topics Math/College Algebra MA 109.

SKCTC tuition this fall is \$135 per hour or \$405 per class. The cost for HCHS students to take a dual credit class is \$202.50.

Expansion plans are in place for the program, said Reynolds.

"There are plans between the high school and KCTCS (Kentucky Community and Technical College System) to continue to add course offerings," she said. "We also continue to refine the courses we already teach so the success we have experienced will continue into the future."

As a parent, Reynolds said she is excited about the opportunity for her own two children, both currently elementary students in the school district.

“I am elated at the opportunity to have them gain college hours while in high school,” she said.

She stressed the program benefits students with their head start on college and the higher level of learning, while helping parents save valuable dollars on tuition and textbooks

“For your child to be given the chance to get a jump on college is an extraordinary opportunity that you can’t place a value on,” she said. “They are able to pursue this level of course work within their high school classroom with instructors with whom they are familiar. In other words, your children are not just a number on a roster at a big college.”

Howard said he can’t emphasize enough the importance of the dual credit program to students and parents as a result of the economic changes across the nation.

“Parents can save a huge amount of money in college expenses for their children,” he said. “We are constantly looking at ways to cut costs, get free textbooks and design the course so they are available to all students who wish to take them. A student can graduate from HCHS and be listed as a sophomore in college.”

Reynolds said the dual credit program has helped to strengthen the guidance program at HCHS.

“I feel it has made it (the guidance program) stronger,” she said. “This has given us a resource that for many years we lacked, the ability to offer students who sought to learn at high levels the opportunity to advance their learning to the post secondary level while still a high school student. ”

The high school guidance staff has worked closely with the community college system to gain the knowledge “necessary to guide our students in the best direction. We work hard to try and offer the best dual credit opportunities for our students. We are constantly looking for ways to make the program better and more efficient. Our goal is to meet the needs of all our students. The dual credit program has allowed us a very important resource to do this.”