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Early higher education spurs positive changes

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At Castle High School, Windward Community College will offer 14 early college courses, allowing more students to earn college credits or a degree while they complete their high school diploma.

High schools in Windward Oahu are committed to provide postsecondary opportunities for all our students. Consider that in 2014, Windward Community College (WCC) offered a single course on a high school campus, Kailua High School. Today, public school students in Windward Oahu can choose from among 23 college level courses — and that number is growing.

At Castle High School alone, WCC will offer 14 early college courses, allowing far more students to earn college credits or a degree while they complete their high school diploma.

This “early college” program seeks to create generational change and brighter futures through higher education by increasing access to underserved learners, and challenging all students to strive and achieve more. Consequently, parent and family expectations of what is possible for their child change as well.

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We expect that Windward public high school students will complete approximately 1,300 credits over the next five years, with priority going toward those students who are the first in their family to attend college or whose families are considered low-income earners. Several area high schools are even helping students accumulate enough credit to graduate with both a high school and associate degree.

Efforts that more closely align high schools and community colleges benefit both institutions. We share a mutual interest to expand college enrollment and completion over time, particularly to uplift underserved students as well as to address the rate at which public high school students enter colleges and universities.

Our shared goal is for all high school students to earn six or more college credits before graduating from high school. Early data from the Hawaii P-20 initiative has shown that taking college level courses while still in high school increases college enrollment considerably — 81 percent enrollment for those with some college credit versus 53 percent with no credits).

We also know that taking college-level courses in high school accelerates a student’s momentum toward completing a degree. Our students are definitely rising to the challenge, averaging a 3.41 grade point average in early college courses at Windward Community College with 95 percent earning a C or better.

We are able to provide these opportunities thanks to the generous support of competitive federal funds like Title III and private funds from the Harold KL Castle Foundation and Kamehameha Schools. However, these sources are only sufficient for us to dream big and get started. With mounting evidence of success, now is the time for permanent public support.

We are grateful that early college is a stated budget priority for the governor, as well as leadership from both the Department of Education and the University of Hawaii. As educators, we know firsthand that increasing access to higher education opportunities inspires students, vastly improving their future ability to earn living-wage jobs and

ensure the success of generations to come. Early college creates positive generational change and has a proven record of success that can be replicated statewide.

Ardis Eschenberg is vice chancellor for academic affairs at Windward Community College, and Bernadette Tyrell is principal of James B. Castle High School.

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