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The Legacy Class

Liz Babiarz

Coming from a family in which no one has graduated school, Derrick Standifer could have easily become a child of poverty.

But instead, the 18 year old is graduating May 28 with a high school diploma from Carver High School and 39 college credits from Georgia State University.

Standifer and 78 other students were able to rise above challenging environments and achieve academic success through the Early College Initiative at the New Schools of Atlanta partnership between Georgia State and Atlanta Public Schools.

They have been dubbed the "Legacy Class" because they are the first Early College seniors in the state of Georgia to graduate from a college.

Even more impressive, all of the seniors have been awarded college scholarships to help with tuition. Like Standifer, the other members of the Legacy Class will become the first members of their families to head to college.

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"Early College turned me into a hard working student," said Standifer, who is the class salutatorian. "It was really challenging – you either take on GSU or you quit. There was a lot of competition, but now I feel like I can do anything now."

Carver Early College High School was the first of its kind when it opened in 2005 and is funded by the Melinda Gates Foundation. It was established to help improve graduation rates at Carver High School which at 36 percent in 2004 were among the lowest in the nation. In the program, students take college-level courses at Carver High School and on the Georgia State campus.

The Pell Institute reports that only 24 percent of low income, first-generation high school graduates go to college. The Early College model is designed to increase the number of underrepresented students in postsecondary education by giving them a jump start on their college education. The Early College graduating class is 99 percent minority and 72 percent of students are on free or reduced lunch.

Even while taking college-level courses at GSU, Early College students outperformed their peers at traditional Atlanta high schools. For example, in 2008, the Early College junior class ranked first among Atlanta Public School System on all sections of the state-mandated High School Graduation Test.

"We are excited about the success of these students," said Gwendolyn Benson, associate dean of State's College of Education and GSU liaison for the Early College program.

Early College at Carver primarily serves students living in the area surrounding the school in the

Atlanta. Students must apply to attend the program; however, students from the immediate neighborhood are given first choice of attendance with any extra seats open to the district. A student's Crite Reference Competency Test scores, grade-point averages, teacher recommendations and previous academic performance are factors in admittance.

Students in the Early College program take courses found on most college freshmen schedules including English 1102, college algebra and economics. But they learn more than what they read in books and attend lectures.

They are taught study and time management skills that help them juggle classes, school activities, part-time jobs and other responsibilities. Standifer, for example, took classes at Georgia State and worked while playing football, running track and working part-time at a movie theater. He also helped College of Education Dean Randy Kamphaus with his research project, while earning mostly A's and B's.

The Early College program also broadens students' experiences with international trips to places like Costa Rica and Japan.

"Personally, it made me see there's a bigger world and I'm just a small part of it, but I can make a difference," Standifer said of his trip to Panama and Costa Rica.

Many students attribute their success to the unending support they received from educators at their high school and Georgia State during the program. In fact, Standifer was inspired to become a teacher and will pursue an education degree at Florida A&M University, bringing his GSU credits along with him.

"Over the past four years, we have demonstrated what is possible when students are provided with the same level of teachers, additional student support through college mentors and study coaches and, of course, the same level of place experienced by high school students on a university campus," Benson said.

The commencement ceremony for the Early College High School students and all schools at the program will be held at 8 p.m. on May 28 at the Atlanta Civic Center. The commencement address will be delivered by Arthur Blank, co-founder of Home Depot. The University System of Georgia Chancellor Erroll Southworth will join Early College students on stage to congratulate them.

For more information, visit <http://srt5.atlantapublicschools.us/carverec/>