

# High school to roll out early college program to students

By [Ted Yoakum](#)

Thanks to a new partnership between Dowagiac Union Schools, Lewis Cass ISD and Southwestern Michigan College, students at Dowagiac Union High School may receive the opportunity to get a jump start on their college degrees — and their future careers.

Starting next school year, students will be able to apply for the chance to enter the district's new early college program, which will allow select students to dual enroll at both the high school and the Dowagiac community college in order to receive their high school and associate's degree in the same academic year, with only one additional year of study. In addition, they will be able to enroll at Southwestern Michigan College at no cost.



School officials are currently holding a series of information meetings with students and parents about the program, and are looking to begin the application process by spring, said Mikki Spagnoli, CTE director with Lewis Cass.

Dowagiac is the second school district in the county to offer early college to its students, as Edwardsburg Public Schools rolled out a similar program four years ago. The two districts are among many others in Michigan to roll out these kinds of initiatives, especially since Gov. Rick Snyder's recent push for wider adoption early college programs across the state, Spagnoli said.

"The concept of early college has been around for the last 10 to 15 years," Spagnoli said. "But the growth has just kind of skyrocketed in the last few years."

Students who enroll in the program will take classes at both the college and high school beginning their junior year, with their workload increasing during their senior year of school. They will be required to take an additional year of school as well, though they will only have to physically attend class at SMC, with their remaining high school coursework completed through online instruction, said Union Schools Superintendent Paul Hartsig.

The program builds upon other dual enrollment programs the high school and ISD have offered its students over the last few years, which have included not only the ability for students to attend college courses at SMC but also opportunities for students to study vocational skills with Lewis Cass and Van Buren Technology Center.

Only a select number of students who apply for the program will be enrolled in the program, though, and will require students to put in extensive time and effort to keep up with the heavy course load, Hartsig said.

"Commitment is key, and not all students will be able to give that level of commitment," he said.

Once students earn their associate's degrees, they will be able to either use their college credits to transfer to a four-year university to continue their education or they can use their degree to help them get an early jump in the job market, Hartsig said.

At the moment, the district will be focusing on enrollment with freshman students, assembling a cohort that will move through the program together as a group beginning their sophomore year. Students and their parents enrolled in the program will have the chance to attend several seminars that will help prepare the group for college coursework, Hartsig said.

While graduating a year after their fellow classmates, the cohort will still walk with their class during their high school graduation ceremony, the superintendent said.

With the percentage of jobs requiring college education continuing to climb, the opportunities that Dowagiac Union Schools and its partners offer local students to get an affordable college education are more valuable than ever, Spagnoli said

“We’re raising the level of education in the community, and the more educated a community is, the stronger that community is,” Hartsig said.

People interested in learning more about the early college program can contact Spagnoli at (269) 445-6224 or [mspagnoli@dowagiacschools.org](mailto:mspagnoli@dowagiacschools.org).

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