

The latest research  
on high school  
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that students leave  
school because they  
are not challenged  
by their classes.

They're bored.

—*The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of  
High School Dropouts*, March, 2006  
[WWW.SilentEpidemic.org](http://WWW.SilentEpidemic.org)

It's time for a  
change...

EXPECTATIONS

LEARNING

CURRICULUM

SUPPORT

SCHOOL SIZE

PARTNERSHIP

# Early College of Alaska

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Steve Levey, 2008

## INTRODUCTION

**Let's work on solving a problem.** The problem? High school is, to borrow a phrase, "a long, drawn-out lull." Before high school, Americans are among the highest achieving students in the world. But starting in junior high, American students enter a muddle of lowered standards, confused expectations and easy excuses. In the meantime their counterparts in other countries are catching up to their elementary gains and then zipping right on by them (*High Schools*, 2001). Those students who survive the lull of American high school and graduate lurch clumsily but optimistically into college. Sadly, in Alaska, only 27% of those graduates are ready to begin college (Green, 2005). The high school lull is now the college lull as students take remedial courses to bring them to college readiness. Many never get there. At four-year colleges in the US, 26% of freshmen do not return for a sophomore year, and at two-year colleges, 45% do not return (*Ticket to Nowhere*, 1999; Wolk, 2005).

Problems beget problems. There is no shortage of data on American students' lack of preparedness for high school graduation, for college, and especially for the world of work, which now, indeed, includes the whole world. Here is just one disheartening fact from the New York Times: "The National Assessment of Adult Literacy, given in 2003 by the Department of Education, found that less than a third of the college graduates it surveyed demonstrated that they were able to read complex English texts and draw complicated inferences" (Arenson, 2006).

Our children are emerging into a world where they will compete with a billion workers in a global marketplace in which their competitors will work for less pay and are more educated. New York Times columnist and Pulitzer-prize winning author, Thomas L. Friedman points out, "When I was a child my parents told me to eat all of my food because people in China and India were starving. Now I tell my children to do

their homework because people in China and India are starving for their jobs."

### **This is Sputnik redux with a twist, we are not facing a technological problem.**

The challenge we face is to restore the essential relationship at the heart of learning: that between the teacher and the student. The answer is to structure a school that has one expectation for

its students: that they pursue further education. This goal requires a revival of values in the classroom: hard work, self-reliance and entrepreneurship. What would this kind of school be like? Luckily we don't have to start from scratch. This proposal is based on the research and practice of the Early College High School Initiative. Under this initiative, dozens of early colleg-

es blend secondary and post-secondary learning into accelerated student achievement. (See [www.earlycolleges.org](http://www.earlycolleges.org) for more information.)

### **The Early College High School (ECHS) joins high school and college into a coherent educational program.**

Students at the middle school level prepare for the rigor and challenge of college-prep coursework by mastering content, especially in the areas of reading, writing and math. High school students pursue intensive core academic coursework rooted in the liberal arts tradition and its focus on science and the humanities. Secondary teachers, university faculty and counselors work together to teach, support and guide students. Students graduate with an Associates degree and are fully prepared for further challenges in college and the workplace.

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## **PURPOSE**

**To create Early College of Alaska (ECA)**, a charter secondary school in partnership with the University of Alaska, whose focus is core academic learning to fully prepare graduates for work and post-secondary education.

## **PHILOSOPHY AND RESEARCH**

**The philosophy underpinning this proposal comes from teachers who want a structure for success.** We want to restore the relationship between teachers and students. Early College of Alaska is inspired by *Thinking K-16*, a research publication of The Education Trust, and by *Jobs for the Future*, the outreach arm of the Gates Foundation Early College Initiative.

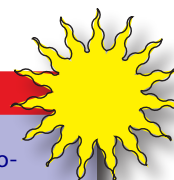
The ECHS model is operating today in 67 schools in 24 states. Washington, California, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, Utah, and Georgia have statewide ECHS initiatives. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, through the organization Jobs For the Future, has committed \$1.2 billion toward the establishment of 170 early college high schools by 2008. "Early college high schools are different from conventional schools and from one another, but they share many of the characteristics of successful schools: a clear sense of mission, high standards for all, close teacher-student relationships, personalized education, an integrated curriculum, flexibility in the use of time, an emphasis on student work, a real world context for learning, and the continuous involvement of parents and the community" (Wolk, 2005).

**Early College High School benefits a wide population of students:** those who do not have the academic preparation to meet high school standards; those who may not be able to afford the high cost of college; English language learners; and those who must balance school, work, and family obligations. These are often the populations represented in high school dropout statistics. The latest research on high school dropouts shows that students leave school because they are not challenged by their classes. They're bored (Bridgeland, 2006). The ECHS initiative offers these students something different. Instead of remediation, they get inspiration. Instead of what

President George W. Bush powerfully calls "the soft bigotry of low expectations," they get the hard work of meeting high standards.

"The partners in the initiative believe that encountering the rigor, depth, and intensity of college work at an earlier age inspires average, underachieving, and well-prepared high school students" (*Core Principles*, 3). The benefits to students are significant. Research shows that students who complete a four-year college degree earn 70% more than those who graduate from high school, and college graduates are four times more likely to be employed than high school dropouts (*A New Core Curriculum*, 2003).

## **CORE PRINCIPLES**



Early college high schools are small, autonomous schools where:

- Students earn an Associate's degree or two years of college credit toward the baccalaureate while in high school; and
- The middle grades are included.

Early college high schools have the potential to improve high school graduation rates and better prepare students for family supporting careers by:

- Changing the structure of the high school years;
- Compressing the number of years to a college degree; and
- Removing financial barriers to college.

Early college high schools also share the attributes of high performing schools:

- Small settings, with up to 400 students per school;
- Respect and responsibility among students, among faculty, and between students and faculty;
- Time for staff collaboration and for the inclusion of parents and the community in an educational partnership.

—Early College High School Initiative, Core Principles.  
[www.earlycolleges.org](http://www.earlycolleges.org)

# KEY IDEAS BASED ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

## 1. EXPECTATIONS

**High expectations for student success are crucial.** Unfortunately, in today's schools it works something like this: successful students generate high expectations. Low-performing students generate low expectations and are channeled into remedial or vocational classes. This winnowing process does not benefit the students it means to assist, and the results are dire, especially for low-income and minority students. According to the Education Trust, "by age 17, only about 1 in 17 students can read and gain information from specialized text—something like the science section in your local newspaper" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The expectation of all Early College of Alaska students is that they can master college-prep academic coursework.

Patte Barth and Kati Haycock, research scholars at the Education Trust, reveal that "Teachers often hesitate to place low-achieving students into tough courses for fear it will set them up for failure. Yet we're learning that low-achieving students are typically no more likely to

**Low achieving students need much more than remediation. They need inspiration.**

fail more difficult classes than they are in the watered-down ones where we often warehouse them. Indeed, when bottom-quartile students are placed in a low-level English course, nearly half—47 percent—fail. Put the same students in a college-prep English course and failure rates decline by about half" (*A New Core Curriculum*, 2003).

## 2. LEARNING

**Inspiration comes from many places.** The early college high school roots it in the love of learning. At Early College of Alaska, students will grapple with ideas in the classroom, engage in scientific research in university laboratories, and initiate service projects in the community.

**In the ECHS, knowledge is created in the classroom** in the give and take that occurs between students, the teacher and ideas. Learning is a dynamic process based on practice, feedback and revision. The goal for ECHS students in all subjects is mastery, not simply a passing grade. The teacher guides learning but is not the sole source of it.

**Central to the development of a learning culture is the use of "cohorts."** Students will be formed into long-term groups that will serve as "learning families." Each cohort will have a base classroom and teachers will come and go throughout an academic day providing instruction and guidance as needed.

**The college setting provides further inspiration.** At Early College of Alaska, students will trade hall monitors and bells for personal responsibility and trust (Lieberman, 2004). Students are encouraged to become self-sufficient and to take responsibility for their studies. "A college campus has a powerful appeal for students, including its symbolic meaning as a sign of capability and adult trust" (Wolk, 2004).

**As a small school within a larger college, ECA serves as a supportive structure.** Here, counselors, teachers and staff can intensively address adolescent developmental needs not met in the college setting.

**Research shows that students, all students, are more likely to pass high-level courses than remedial or vocational courses.**

### 3. CURRICULUM

**A college-prep curriculum is the best preparation for all high school students regardless of their goals after graduation.** Mastering college-prep courses not only gives students the option of pursuing post secondary education, it also puts them in a position to confidently meet the demands of the job market. Employers from all industries look for workers with strong reading and writing skills, higher math skills, and the ability to understand data, statistics and probabilities.

Employers do not actively seek students who have passed remedial high school classes. "Business leaders know ... that the knowledge and skills typically taught in the college-prep curriculum are far better aligned with demands in today's workplace than are the 'skills' typically taught in vocational courses" (*A New Core Curriculum, 2003*).

**At Early College of Alaska students gain college credit while still in high school.** Students can graduate from high school with an Associate of Arts degree in hand. This opens a door wide to students who have not traditionally sought post-secondary education, including those who find the cost of college prohibitive, students who have English as a second language and students who may have family obligations and work schedules to manage.

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Early College of Alaska extends the promise of higher education and its real-world rewards of higher pay, satisfying employment and family stability, to all its students.

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### EARLY COLLEGE OF ALASKA CORE CLASSES

- 4 years of English
- 3 years of mathematics including:
  - Algebra 1
  - Geometry
  - Algebra 2
- 1 or more years of mathematics beyond Algebra 2. For example:
  - Trigonometry
  - Calculus
  - Statistics (college level)
- 3 years science including:
  - Biology
  - Chemistry
  - Physics
- 3 years of social studies including:
  - World History
  - U.S. History
  - Economics
- 2 years of a second language

(A New Core Curriculum, p. 15)

**Non-academic enrichment courses for grades 7, 8 and 9 will be taught by community-based professionals and UA faculty.** High school students can enroll in UA courses for enrichment credit. UA and ECA may choose to establish special enrichment courses and assign specific instructors for high school students. All UA courses will be credited towards an Associates degree by 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Early College of Alaska seniors will be required to develop and execute an independent project culminating in a written thesis.** Projects will have a civic or research emphasis and will require students to demonstrate workplace professionalism. Senior projects may be hosted by ongoing UA research activities or local government institutions but will be assessed and directed by ECA faculty. ECA's middle school students will accelerate academic skills development with intensive, consistent training.

#### 4. SUPPORT

**When the bar is set high, the cushion underneath it must be deep and firm.** ECA needs dedicated and highly qualified teachers and counselors to challenge and guide students. ECA needs teachers who have an entrepreneurial spirit, teachers who understand that the risks, returns and responsibilities of education rest squarely in their hands... teachers who measure their own success by the success of their students.

**Traditional metrics for teacher productivity do not work in an early college high school.** With a successful ECHS teacher, students advance more than one grade level in a year. Teachers must have a caseload based on the rate of student progress. Researchers at the Gates Small School Initiative define this as fewer than 80 students per teacher.

**A cornerstone to ECA's success will be engaged and innovative counselors, one for each grade.** They will bring their skills into the classroom to create a homeroom base for each cohort where students can work to overcome obstacles to their academic success, including addressing the challenges of adolescent development in a college setting.

Counselors will form relationships with students, families, teachers and the community in order to support academic achievement. They will collaborate to mobilize resources in support of students. And of course, they will use their counseling skills in more traditional ways, to work through social and personal barriers to success, to facilitate student's enrollment in enrichment courses and to use testing and assessment data to insure student and school goals are being met (*Challenging*, 2002).

**As with other choice or magnet schools in the Fairbanks community, family or sponsor involvement in students' academic lives will be mandatory.** This will include conferencing with teachers and time devoted to program support.

#### REQUISITES FOR SUCCESS

from *THE ECHS CONCEPT; REQUISITES FOR SUCCESS*  
by JANET LIEBERMAN  
founder of the first early college in 1972

- Small (defined as less than 450 students).
- Location on a college campus provides motivation and mitigates usual teen behavior, and students develop a future orientation.
- Shared space and having teenagers on campus reduces the traditional fears of college faculty toward teaching younger students and helps encourage collaboration between high school and college faculty.
- Functioning on a college schedule promotes longer classes, enables project learning and portfolio assessment, and encourages personal freedom. High school students are treated as adults: there are no bells, no hall monitors, and no metal detectors. There are personal responsibility, trust and encouragement.
- High school faculty have an enhanced role. They gain privileges of college faculty, better facilities, private offices, personal telephones, professional respect, and the opportunity to teach at the college level.
- Early college enables and encourages intensive guidance.
- A program of internship is encouraged.
- The calendar is based on the college schedule.

#### Results in NYC:

97% of students stayed in school.

87% of students graduated.

90% of graduates went to college.

## 5. SCHOOL SIZE

**Long-term relationships in a small school setting promote student achievement** and prevent academic and social problems from getting out of hand. ECA's initial enrollment will be about 150 students; its eventual maximum enrollment will be 300 students.

At Early College of Alaska, students will form learning families to grapple with ideas, engage in scientific research, and initiate service projects in the community.

## ECHS FUNDAMENTAL TENETS

- Reaches out for students who are underserved by the regular schools
- Demands a cooperative relationship between the district high school administration and the college president
- Offers a different sequence of courses from the tenth grade and an accelerated program from the ninth grade to the Associate's degree...
- Combines the resources of a high school on the college campus with the college facilities (gym, library, cafeteria), making them all available to the early college high school student
- Requires active college campus collaboration from the college administrative structure: faculty interchange, support from the college division of finance, admissions, scheduling, and counseling under a college-appointed administrator
- Enhances the role of high school faculty
- Integrates high school and college study in an articulated program

**The structural features are "non-negotiable."  
All are necessary for the success of the model.**

—Janet Lieberman, from *The ECHS Concept: Requisites for Success*.

## 6. PARTNERSHIP

**ECA relies upon a firm partnership between the charter school and the University of Alaska.**

The necessary pieces of the partnership include:

- Funding provided by the State of Alaska through the school charter law
- Classroom space provided by the University
- Qualified students welcomed into University classes
- Integration with the daily and annual University schedule
- University facilities such as laboratories, library and cafeteria are available for ECA students and teachers

There will be finer details to negotiate once the request to charter is approved by the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. However, the above list should be considered the foundation on which the Early College of Alaska must be built.

## MAKING IT A REALITY

**Today Early College of Alaska is a dream, one shared by teachers and students and parents.** The task now is to extend the dream to a wider audience and work on making it real. It's hard to imagine a detailed timeline, but if the following steps are pursued with faith and vigor, Early College of Alaska could be admitting students for the 2009-2010 school year.

1. Secure University support in pursuing charter
2. Appoint an Advisory Committee to write charter
3. Gain School Board approval in pursuing charter
4. Forward application to State Board of Education
5. Use charter to apply for development grants
6. Establish a school site on university campus
7. Advertise for student applications
8. Hire and train teachers on the ECHS approach
9. Start learning.



## THE PROMISE

### TO OUR STUDENTS:

1. ECA will create a seamless intellectual progression for students from middle school through high school and into college.
2. ECA will prepare middle school students for the rigor and challenge of college-prep classes.
3. ECA will partner with UA to grant high school diplomas to students achieving a college-ready academic standard and Associates degrees by the end of 12th grade.
4. ECA will Provide students with a mature learning environment with access to UA scholars and resources--promotingself-directedachievement with appropriate developmental support.

### TO OUR COMMUNITIES:

1. ECA will increase the number of job-ready, college-educated citizens willing to build our State.
2. ECA will save money for students, parents, and taxpayers through dual-credit opportunities.

### TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA:

1. ECA will nurture a cadre of college ready students—a pipeline of highly qualified students feeding directly into UA.
2. ECA will support a strong public image for UA as an institution willing to upgrade high schools to increase college success.
3. ECA will allow UA professors opportunities to fulfill their tri-partite obligation in service to the State.
4. ECA will serve UA researchers with qualified interns/assistants to support their research and teaching obligations.
5. ECA will permit access to a secondary learning venue for studying and testing instructional pedagogy.

ECA will broaden UA's success at achieving its mission - to be Alaska's educational leader.

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The simple activity of being guided smartly while being pressed into meeting challenges, will give these students the dexterity and courage necessary to hit the ground running in our workforce, our universities and our democracy.

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