Editor’s note: For the past 11 years, 100 Randolph County School System students per year have been accepted into Randolph Early College High School, where they could earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree upon graduation. As the program enters its 12th year, early college programs are being rolled out at Asheboro High School and Uwharrie Charter Academy. What is the draw for this alternative form of education? Coming Tuesday: A graduate of the inaugural Class of 2010 shares her early college experience.

By Micki Bare
mbare@courier-tribune.com
@MickiBareCT

ASHEBORO — Myth: Early college high school options are about the best and the brightest kids — the ones headed to Harvard and Yale to become doctors, lawyers and professors. If this is your perception, you have a lot to learn about early college opportunities — especially those in Randolph County.

“The premise of the early college was to serve underrepresented students, groups of people underrepresented in colleges and universities,” Cathy Waddell, retired Randolph Early College High School (RECHS) principal, said.

The students the program targeted for recruitment were students from low-income households, minority students and those that represented a reflection of the local population as a whole.

The resulting population of students served in early college high school models is a combination of those who excel and those who have struggled in the past.

“Nine out of 10 times, the best students (in early college high school) were the kids who had struggled,” Waddell said.

It’s important for all middle school students and their families, whether they attend Randolph County School System (RCSS), Asheboro City Schools (ACS) or Uwharrie Charter Academy (UCA), to understand early college high school. This fall, ACS and UCA will introduce early college high school options to their students in collaboration with Randolph Community College (RCC).

Two models

RECHS, which opened in 2006 on the campus of RCC, operates under the N.C. Cooperative Innovative High School program. There are currently 125 such campuses across the state. Students in this early college model are enrolled in both high school and college courses during all four years. They also have an optional fifth year, or grade 13, during which they can complete their diploma and degree if they need it.

As a public school option, Innovative High Schools are free for students.

ACS and UCA are launching their early college programs in the traditional and charter high school settings. They will make use of the N.C. College & Career Promise (CCP) program, which allows students enrolled in their existing high schools to access college courses. Once a student is designated as a junior and has passed the RCC placement test — or has attained a qualifying ACT score — he or she can enroll in classes at RCC. As long as a student is taking at least one high school course each semester, the college courses, including textbook expenses, are free for the high school student.

With planning and support, when a student in Randolph County graduates from either of the early college high school models, he or she will also have had the opportunity to meet the requirements for an Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree. At that time, if they continue on to a state college or university, they would begin as juniors and could complete a bachelor’s degree in only two more years.

HERE’S THE DEAL — Cathy Waddell talks with 10th graders on the first day of school at Randolph Early College High School Aug. 4, 2010.

Expanding early college into existing high schools

About two years ago, RCC President Dr. Robert Shackleford began
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with Ashburn City Schools Superintendent Dr. Terry Werrell to identify more opportunities for college-level coursework at AHS. They approached the need by saying, “What’s possible?” Shackelford said.

Outside of the RECHS model, students have to be junior in high school before they can attend classes at RCC. That stipulation made early college outside of the model a challenge — but not impossible. The thing that opened the door of opportunity was that DPT (N.C. Department of Public Instruction) started letting the high schools do their own high school courses in the eighth and even the seventh grade,” Shackelford said.

What followed were discussions about front-loading high school work at the middle school level. This would make students to complete more of their high school requirements by the end of their second year, which meant they could take college courses required for an AA or AS degree during their last two years of high school. “That model doesn’t require you to set up a separate school, a separate school number, doesn’t require you to lose membership,” Shackelford said, “if students want to play on the ball team, they can.” Whether a middle school student wants to participate in the early college program or not, “it is in their favor,” Shackelford said, “to complete high school courses early. It opens up to not only early college opportunities, but also internships and apprenticeships.”

AA or AS coursework is designed to prepare students for college-level courses. To receive college credits, students must pass the course with a grade of C- or better. The credits are transferred to the college of the student’s choice.

“Many students are interested in pursuing this program,” Shackelford said. “They want the challenge and the opportunity to get ahead in their studies.”

Choose early college

When Waddell crosses paths in the community with former students, the feedback is overwhelmingly positive. “The kids would say it really prepared them for the next level — four-year university level courses,” Waddell said. “They knew they were going into that environment that traditional high school students didn’t know. They could read a syllabus. They could manage Tuesday, Thursday, Monday, Wednesday, Friday and online classes. They were comfortable approaching an instructor to get help. When I talk to them now, they’re entrepreneurs, teachers, nurses — they’re so grateful for having had that opportunity.”

Potential early college high school students “need to be able to advocate for themselves and to know when they need help and to feel comfortable asking for help,” RECHS Principal April Thompson said. “Students need to be motivated, and be able to lead and learn from others.”

Thompson added, “and that anyone can take. It’s not just the college students.”

Early college is a unique program, which is being implemented with help from Career and Technical Education Director Nancy Cross, who is also a former RECHS liaison, and Counselor and Technical Education Coordinator Misty Wells. “We want to make sure our kids are as marketable and as ready for college as possible by adding to that resume things outside of academics,” Thompson said.

Coming soon

As ACS and UCA launch their early high school programs, RECHS is going into its 15th year with a new program for its students. According to Thompson, the school is adding an internship program. More than 40 students are interested in the new program, which is being implemented with help from Career and Technical Education Director Nancy Cross, who is also a former RECHS liaison, and Counselor and Technical Education Coordinator Misty Wells. “We want to make sure our kids are as marketable and as ready for college as possible by adding to that resume things outside of academics,” Thompson said.