

Gateway to College program earns high praise

By Sandra Dias
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HOLYOKE—School Superintendent/Receiver Stephen Zrike recently gave the School Committee an overview of the Gateway to College program for struggling high school students.

His verdict: the nine-year-old program is an "absolute success."

Zrike recently traveled to Washington, D.C. with HCC's new president Christina Royal to talk about the school department's partnership with the college at a conference hosted by associations for community college administrators and school superintendents.

The Holyoke schools and HCC jointly participate in the national Gateway to College program, which serves students between the ages of 16 and 21 who have left high school or are struggling to finish school. Gateway to College allows students to earn their high school diploma while receiving credits toward a post-secondary credential.

"The model that we have in Holyoke is probably the most successful model in the country," Zrike said. He said the program is intended to serve students who are the verge of dropping out of high school, but have otherwise shown academic potential.

"These students deserve to get an education and we are finding that they have benefited by being dually enrolled at HCC and the high schools, but all their coursework is happening at HCC," he said.

Zrike said the program makes sense in a city such as Holyoke, which, he said in his presentation, is the poorest school system in the state, has the highest percentage of homeless students statewide, and was put into state receivership because its schools are vastly underperforming.

The average age of students participating in Gateway to College is 17.7 years, 63 percent female, and 60 percent students of color. Seventy-two percent of participants are the first generation to attend any college and 86 percent qualify

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for free lunch.

Zrike said the program has expanded from 12 students in 2010 to 60 students this school year. The attendance rate for those participating in the program is 80 percent. Zrike noted that reported satisfaction rates among Gateway students exceed those at both of the city's high schools. He said the school department surveys middle and high school students each year about their happiness with various aspects of school life. While 67 percent of those participating in Gateway said they felt both disengaged and unsafe at their previous school, 71 percent said they are now excited about going to school, 88 percent felt their school experience was now positive, 96 percent felt their cultural heritage and language was respected, 87 percent said their classes "really made them think," and 75 percent said they are interested in their classes.

"This is really powerful stuff," Zrike said. "Their overall satisfaction rates are higher than what we are seeing at our two high schools and at the middle school level. It says something about the quality of the experience these young people are getting in this program."

Zrike noted that the graduation rate of students in the Gateway to College program also exceeds that of the city's two high schools, which hovered just above 60 percent last year.

Students are not immediately successful in the program, however. Entering students have an average GPA of 1.49 and 1:5 new students reports struggling in their first term. But over time and with remediation, the students are accelerated into college-level courses.

Zrike said the Gateway to College program is successful for many reasons, including the offering of creative courses, the blend of high school and college classes on a college campus, progress is measured by credit acquisition, not grade level, students have access to 24-hour e-tutoring and all the resources of the college—from a vast library collection to IT help, various clubs on campus, computer labs, travel opportunities, ESOL classes, advising, career counseling, and more.

"These are the kinds of things we need to engage and motivate students and that we need to ramp up in our own schools," he said.

Zrike said students receive close one-on-one support in the Gateway to College program and he mentioned its director, Vivian Ostrowski, as critical to its success.

"She has provided outstanding leadership to that program for a long time," he said. "The care and kindness she shows to every single student is reflected in

their data."

School Committee members had questions about the financing of the program, which, Zrike explained, is paid for from state funds allocated to the district for educating students; \$7,500 from those per-pupil costs goes with each student for their education at HCC.

Zrike suggested he would eventually like to see all alternative programs included under one umbrella within the Holyoke public schools in something he called an Opportunity Academy in a way that would allow for reallocation of per-pupil costs within the system.

"For every student that goes out of the high school, it is funding that is pulled from the total funding of the high school that can impact the type of programs and activities they are able to offer." Only a portion—\$7,500—of the per-pupil cost goes to HCC with each Gateway student for their tuition and the remainder goes back to the school department budget.

Zrike noted that other students who must be educated in an alternative setting, such as programs at Lighthouse, also take funds with them from the school department.

Ward 7 School Committee member Nyles L. Courchesne, said he was "completely blown away" by his last tour of the William J. Dean Vocational Technical High School and how it has improved over the last few years. He said he'd like to see more effort made to identify channel potential drop-outs to Dean as early as middle school, rather than sending them to an outside program.

Zrike said he would not want to "perpetuate" the idea that education and careers "in the technical space" are just for low-achievers.

School Committee Vice Chairman Devin Sheehan said that establishing all the alternative programs as a sort of separate school within the Holyoke public schools—wherever they are located—may also benefit the two high schools' performance data in the area of attendance rates and MCAS testing.

Mayor Alex Morse said having a separate program at HCC spares the city from having to hire teachers and assume overhead. Morse said he would also like to see the School Department move forward in establishing a formal partnership with the Care Center, which has, for many years, helped pregnant and parenting high school dropouts to earn a diploma. He noted that program has been operating without any financial assistance from the Holyoke public schools.

"They are not getting any district money," he said, adding that negotiations so far have failed to make that happen.