



# “A Small School with Big Chances”: The 21st Century Charter School at Gary

By Amy Cummings and Frederick M. Hess

May 2019

## Key Points

- The 21st Century Charter School at Gary (21C) represents a distinctive approach to bridging the high-school-to-college gap. While it is far too early to say whether it “works,” this model of getting students on campus represents a promising strategy that few schools or systems are currently pursuing.
- 21C’s program is unlike most college-credit programs in three key ways: (1) students take courses on college campuses, (2) there is no exclusive partnership between the high school and college, and (3) students are not limited to associate degrees.
- Between 2015 and 2018, 173 21C graduates earned a cumulative of 1,720 college credits, 16 students graduated with an associate degree, and one graduated with a bachelor’s degree. In 2019, nine students will earn associate degrees, and 66 graduating seniors will have earned 1,250 college credits.

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Driving the streets of Gary, Indiana, one feels frustration and abandoned hope. Once the home of a thriving steel industry, Gary has suffered a fate familiar to Rust Belt cities: population loss, unemployment, crumbling infrastructure, and illiteracy.<sup>1</sup> Houses, restaurants, and schools are run-down and often shuttered.

Behind the former City Methodist Church—famous for its appearance in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*—sits the elementary building of the 21st Century Charter School at Gary (21C), a K–12 charter school and the flagship campus of the Greater Educational Opportunities (GEO) Foundation (Table 1). GEO is a small charter management organization, founded in 1998 by Kevin Teasley, which today operates five schools in Gary, Indiana, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

GEO focuses on increasing high schoolers’ access to college. In this, GEO is similar to schools and systems across the land. Where it is distinctive, and worth a closer look, is how GEO is going about this.

Many schools now offer students the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school, with four in five US high schools offering college courses to students. In fact, 34 percent of students earn college credit while in high school.<sup>2</sup>

There are three basic ways schools do this. One is dual enrollment, in which courses simultaneously count for high school and college credit and are primarily taught at the high school by college-approved high school teachers.<sup>3</sup> According to US Department of Education data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, 80 percent of the high schoolers earning college credit did so through dual enrollment.

**Table 1. 21st Century Charter School at a Glance**

<b>Founded</b>	2005
<b>Principal</b>	Anthony Cherry
<b>Authorizer</b>	Ball State University
<b>Enrollment</b>	883 (with 500 Students on Waiting List)
<b>Demographic Breakdown</b>	95% Black 2.6% Hispanic 2.5% Multiracial
<b>Free or Reduced-Price Meal Eligibility</b>	83.5%
<b>Special Education Enrollment</b>	12.9%
<b>Grades Served</b>	K–12
<b>Location</b>	Gary, Indiana

Source: Enrollment data from Indiana Department of Education Compass, <https://compass.doe.in.gov/dashboard/overview.aspx?type=school&id=4164>.

A second approach, used by more than two million students a year, involves taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which offer the opportunity to earn college credit by passing an end-of-course exam.<sup>4</sup> A third approach, used much less often, consists of early college programs, in which students enroll in both high school and college courses to earn a high school diploma and college credit.<sup>5</sup>

Some research findings suggest that students who dual enroll in college courses are more likely to graduate high school, enroll in college, and complete a degree than are those who do not.<sup>6</sup> However, other research suggests these positive outcomes are limited to students who took courses on a college campus—just 5 percent of US high schoolers.<sup>7</sup>

### **What Is Distinctive About 21C’s College Program**

21C’s program represents a distinctive approach to bridging the high-school-to-college gap and incorporates elements of multiple college-credit models. While far from unique in offering students the opportunity to earn college credit, 21C’s model of getting students on campus represents something few schools or systems are doing—but that many

might like to emulate. 21C, unlike other schools offering similar opportunities, sees the on-campus element as central to its model because many of its students would be first-generation college students, and experiencing campus removes much of the mystery about college and offers students the opportunity to see themselves as “real college students.” Because of this, examining 21C’s model can provide insight into the challenges and opportunities that may lie ahead for others contemplating more ambitious efforts.

21C’s model is distinctive from most college-credit programs in three key ways. Most importantly, 21C students take courses on college campuses. In traditional early college programs, the high school is located either on or adjacent to campus, with more than three-quarters of dual-credit programs having students take college courses on their high school campus.<sup>8</sup> 21C, on the other hand, purposefully transports students several miles from the high school to a college campus.

Second, 21C does not establish exclusive partnerships with a single college. Typical early college programs involve a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the high school and college, establishing an exclusive relationship. 21C instead allows students to enroll in any of Gary’s local colleges: Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana University Northwest (IUN), Purdue University Northwest, or Vincennes University. This allows 21C students a choice in institution and affords 21C the freedom to select the most rigorous from a range of courses at multiple institutions.

Third, unlike typical early college programs, 21C does not limit students to associate degrees and does not cap the number of college credits its students can earn. Between 2015 and 2018, 173 21C graduates earned a cumulative of 1,720 college credits, 16 students graduated with an associate degree, and one graduated with a bachelor’s degree. And in 2019, nine students will earn associate degrees, and 66 graduating seniors will have earned 1,250 college credits.

It is too early to judge whether 21C’s model “works.” (See Table 2.) However, given the intense interest in finding ways to better equip students to attend and flourish in college, these distinctive elements make 21C’s efforts worth a closer look.

**Table 2. 21st Century Charter School’s Student Performance**

	<b>21st Century</b>	<b>Gary Community School Corporation*</b>
ISTEP+ English/Language Arts, Grades 3–8 (2017–18)	43.5% Passing	28.8% Passing
ISTEP+ Math, Grades 3–8 (2017–18)	27.2% Passing	16.7% Passing
ISTEP+ English/Language Arts, Grade 10 (2017–18)	30.4% Passing	38.0% Passing
ISTEP+ Math, Grade 10 (2017–18)	12.5% Passing	18.7% Passing
College and Career Readiness Rate <sup>9</sup> (2017–18)	80.5%	37.5%
Graduation Rate (2017–18)	93.3%	87.3%
Took at Least One AP Exam (2016–17)	82.9%	21.2%
Average ACT Score (2016–17)	17	17

Note: \*Gary Community School Corporation is Gary, Indiana’s, public school district and serves the most students in Gary.  
 Source: Student performance data from Indiana Department of Education Compass, <https://compass.doe.in.gov/dashboard/overview.aspx?type=school&id=4164>.

## The 21C College Program

Before 21C launched its college program in 2010, approximately 30 percent of 21C graduates were enrolling in college. 21C was using many familiar strategies to help students make it to college: Free Application of Federal Student Aid nights, application assistance, and campus tours. But, because just 13 percent of Gary adults have a bachelor’s degree, school leadership concluded that students were still not getting enough exposure to family and neighbors with college experience.<sup>10</sup> Teasley’s solution was to get students on campus while in high school, so they could experience real college classes on a real campus taught by a real professor. Of the school’s 62 2017–18 graduates, all 62 were accepted into college, the military, or a job right out of high school. Forty-eight percent enrolled in a two- or four-year college the fall immediately after high school—compared to 59 percent of black students nationwide—and 58 percent of those returned for a second year.<sup>11</sup>

The pivotal moment in 21C’s effort was a conversation Teasley had with 21C student Vincent Peña, who was considering dropping out. No one in his family had attended college, and Peña could not afford to either. Teasley took Peña to Ivy Tech to take the ACCUPLACER—the College Board’s online assessment of students’ readiness for college coursework.<sup>12</sup> Peña passed, and in 2013 he

became the first student in northwest Indiana to earn an associate degree in high school.

From there, 21C began enrolling more students in college courses. In 2012, 21C started to require that any student graduating from 21C must earn at least three college credits—the equivalent of one course—to receive their high school diploma. In 2018, the board increased that to 24 college credits, or a full year of college.

### Enrolling High School Students in College.

Because 21C decided not to establish an MOU with the colleges, Teasley went directly to the Ivy Tech admissions office, where he learned that anyone who passes the ACCUPLACER can enroll—regardless of age. 21C therefore began having all eighth-graders take the ACCUPLACER, so they can begin taking courses on campus as early as ninth grade.

21C typically starts students at Ivy Tech and “graduates them up,” as Teasley explains it, to Purdue, IUN, or Vincennes. The majority of 21C students take classes to fulfill their graduation requirement of 24 college credits—as opposed to aiming for a postsecondary degree. And of the 58 students in the 2018–19 school year who are aiming to complete a postsecondary degree while in high school, 53 are pursuing an associate degree, making Ivy Tech Community College the most appropriate place to enroll. The five bachelor’s-degree pursuers are also enrolling at Purdue, IUN,

or Vincennes—as they need coursework beyond what Ivy Tech offers.

All college courses 21C students take are dual credit and dual enrollment, meaning students earn both high school and college credit and are considered students at both 21C and the college. Students work with the 21C guidance counselor to select college courses, but 21C manages the enrollment process for the students to avoid students enrolling in courses that do not add up to a degree or certification.

The number of college classes 21C high schoolers enroll in varies by grade level. For instance, six freshmen (out of 75 total) are taking a combined 60 college credits in the 2018–19 school year, while 43 juniors (out of 53) are taking a combined 535.

While 133 (51 percent) of 21C’s 261 high schoolers are enrolled in at least one college class for the 2018–19 school year, a smaller group of 58 (20 percent of 21C high schoolers) have self-selected onto an accelerated “College Pathway.” The College Pathway is for students who want to earn more than the required 24 college credits for graduation, particularly those who hope to earn an associate or bachelor’s degree in high school.

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education created a Core Transfer Library detailing courses that have been approved as transfer credits between Indiana public colleges and high schools.<sup>13</sup> All courses students take at Ivy Tech, IUN, Purdue, or Vincennes are fully transferrable to a four-year university, meaning 21C graduates may enter a four-year college as a junior.

**Managing the Quality of Courses and Student Work.** 21C works to ensure the quality both of the college courses and of the work their students are doing in these courses.

To verify the quality of the courses, 21C administrators and counselors perform audits twice a semester. If 21C decides a course is not sufficiently rigorous, it will stop enrolling students and direct them to take the equivalent course at another college. This happened one time, with a Spanish course several students were taking at Ivy Tech.

To ensure that students are not getting away with doing subpar work on campus, 21C teachers check in with students weekly on their progress, and the guidance counselor does a grade check for

each student enrolled. 21C staff also meet two to three times a semester with college professors to ensure that students are showing up to class, participating, and staying up-to-date on classwork.

If 21C determines that a student is not meeting expectations on campus, it will first set up a meeting with the student. If their grades or behavior do not improve, then 21C will schedule a meeting with the student and their parent. Typically, issues do not escalate beyond this point, and 21C has never had to pull a student from a college course.

Similarly, 21C students rarely fail their college courses. If a student does fail, 21C first determines why and then provides the appropriate remediation. This may involve a review of the student’s behavior or of course material that the student failed to master.

**Supports.** As 21C students navigate college for the first time, 21C offers a range of supports with coursework preparation, finances, and transportation.

*Summer Institute.* After realizing that many freshmen were not prepared for college coursework, 21C required all incoming ninth-graders to participate in a Summer Institute twice a week for four weeks throughout the summer. Summer Institute acts as “College 101,” and students prepare to take the ACCUPLACER and have the opportunity to earn course credit or participate in an internship program. They also learn skills that introduce them to life on campus, including how to make sense of a college syllabus, navigate their class schedule, and succeed in class without much hands-on support from professors.

*Ongoing Counseling.* Like all schools, 21C’s counselor works with students in selecting coursework—with the added task of selecting which, if any, college courses the student will enroll in. After the Summer Institute, 21C staff meet with incoming ninth-graders to discuss whether the student is ready to begin taking college courses in the fall, or if they should wait to enroll. Each semester, the counselor meets with each student to evaluate whether they are ready for college and, if so, choose the courses in which to enroll.

*Finances.* Once students are enrolled in a college course, GEO directly pays the college for tuition, buys textbooks for students, and provides transportation between 21C and campus. 21C uses general per-pupil K-12 funding to finance its college program: \$7,483 per student in 2017.<sup>14</sup> 21C spent approximately \$200,000 during the 2018–19 school year on its college program, which includes tuition and textbooks. This is about 2 percent of the school’s overall \$9 million budget. 21C’s college-program spending has grown from about \$30,000 in 2012.

*Transportation.* Because 21C students travel to multiple campuses, the school requires multiple buses to transport them to and from campus. 21C owns six minibuses, which cost \$35,000 each to purchase. In addition to this \$210,000 upfront cost, the school also hires six hourly bus drivers, at \$15 an hour for 30 hours a week, to drive students to and from campus, including students who choose to take college classes during the summer. Bus drivers, plus maintenance and fuel, run 21C about \$150,000 annually. These costs are calculated separately from the general costs.

## Earning a Bachelor’s Degree in High School: Raven Osborne

Raven Osborne became a household name in Gary and even received praise from *USA Today*, CBS, and the *Chicago Tribune* for earning a bachelor’s degree before her high school diploma.<sup>15</sup>

Osborne started taking courses at Ivy Tech when she was a high school freshman, earning her associate degree by the end of her sophomore year. Not ready to graduate from 21C, she went to Purdue University Northwest’s campus and enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program as a community college transfer student. On May 5, 2017, she graduated with a bachelor’s in sociology and a minor in early childhood education from Purdue University Northwest. Then, on May 22, she earned her high school diploma from 21C. Today, Osborne is back at 21C, this time as an elementary school reading intervention specialist.

Teasley says there was some backlash from Purdue following Osborne’s public achievement, as the university says its policy is to only admit students with a high school diploma or GED equivalent. However, the high school requirement is listed on the university’s website for only first-time college students, not transfer students.<sup>16</sup> Time will tell if the university plans to change its policy, but Teasley and his students who hope to follow in Osborne’s footsteps hope they will continue to be able to work toward a bachelor’s degree while at 21C.

## Challenges

In ramping its college program up into what it is today, 21C ran into several challenges. The major ones had to do with transportation, scheduling, and nontraditional expectations for high school students.

**Transportation.** Since the high school is not near a college and students travel to multiple campuses, one of the first challenges Teasley ran into was transportation. 21C incurred approximately \$210,000 in initial costs purchasing buses, plus about \$150,000 annually for bus drivers, maintenance, and fuel. Because 21C has appropriate insurance, it has never encountered any liability issues. Teasley explains that it is like taking students on a field trip—only it is one they take every day.

**Scheduling.** Scheduling also caused issues in the program’s early years. When 21C first opened, its daily class schedule followed a traditional seven-hour day, with students taking seven 55-minute classes. Colleges, on the other hand, run on a block schedule, with 90-minute classes every other day.

In the first two years of the program, 21C resisted changing its schedule, trusting that students taking college coursework were, as Teasley put it, “smart and disciplined enough to miss a few minutes of the beginning and end of a high school class.” After two years, however, as more students began enrolling on campus and arriving late to and leaving early from their high school classes, there was more of a noticeable disruption. At that point, the 21C leadership decided that aligning their schedule with the colleges’ schedules would preserve the academic integrity and fidelity of the classes being taught at the high school.

Thus, 21C changed its schedule to an A-day/B-day block format, with 90-minute classes to align with the colleges. On a typical A day,

College Pathway students begin and take most of their classes at 21C and are bussed to campuses for the end of the day. On B days, they are on campus the majority of the day and finish with one class at 21C. Several students are enrolled in the same courses to help with transportation logistics. 21C also changed its academic calendar to align with that of Ivy Tech—as that is where the majority of students are enrolled.

**Nontraditional Expectations for High Schoolers.** Teasley says the biggest challenge has been adult skepticism that high school students can do college work. When he first began communicating with colleges about enrolling high schoolers, most collegiate faculty were hesitant. Teasley estimates that between half and two-thirds were initially resistant to having high schoolers on campus. The number is not as high today, he says, but opposition still lingers.

Because the concern was of the negative effects that enrolling high schoolers might have on campus culture and college performance, Teasley says, 21C needed to convince faculty and campus leaders that they would benefit too. 21C tried to do this in three particular ways. First, Teasley argued that enrolling 21C students on campus could help diversify the student body. Although the town of Gary is 86 percent minority, only 30 percent of Ivy Tech students are, while the 21C students who enroll in college are nearly 100 percent black and Latino.<sup>17</sup> Second, because 21C students are dual enrolled, they boost a college's completion rate when they finish a degree. Third, Teasley points out that the colleges do not need to provide remediation—which between 40 percent and 60 percent of all first-year college students require—since 21C is providing any required remediation through its high school courses.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to skepticism from college faculty, some parents were resistant to their children taking college courses. One parent told Teasley, “Stop talking to my kid about going to college. He’s not college material.” A majority of 21C parents did not go to college, so Teasley says there may be a sense of jealousy among some parents that their child has this opportunity.

21C has also had challenges selling the model to its own teachers. They often have traditional staff

trying to fit a nontraditional model and have had teachers who did not believe certain students were “college material.” Between the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years, 21C saw its most significant teacher turnover to date (about 15 percent, compared to the 5 percent it has historically experienced), which Principal Anthony Cherry attributes to teachers not being “on board.”

## Implications

High schools nationwide are seeking to increase students' access to college, with many offering dual-credit, early college, or AP courses. 21C's program is one intriguing approach that warrants considering as more schools and systems work to get students to and through college.

Those hoping to offer a program similar to 21C's should recognize that they may need to rethink how their school operates, including recalibrating their daily schedule and academic calendar to ensure students taking college courses are not losing class time at the high school or the college. There are also serious financial considerations, including nontrivial upfront transportation costs, as well as ongoing expenses on tuition and textbooks. In all of this, 21C's charter status permits a level of flexibility with scheduling, spending, and transportation that is not afforded to most traditional public schools.

The challenges are real, but so are the benefits—and that may make this kind of approach an easier sell than anticipated. There is the clear benefit to students, who could earn an associate or even a bachelor's degree while in high school—at no cost to their family and with access to supports that students may not otherwise have.

There is also good reason for skeptical collegiate staff and faculty to consider the benefits they may draw in. For instance, campuses struggling with racial diversity may find such programs helpful on that count. When high school students complete postsecondary degrees, the partner colleges can benefit. Meanwhile, colleges need not worry about remediation, since the high school will already be providing it.

Although 21C has faced headwinds, those have started to abate over time. Other schools, particularly in Gary, have attempted to emulate 21C's program.

Meanwhile, Teasley reports that parents outside of Gary, intrigued by the opportunity for their student to earn a bachelor's degree, are reaching out asking if their student can enroll at 21C.

It is far too early to say whether 21C's program "works." Nonetheless, this venture is a practical, creative attempt to tackle the college access

challenge. It just may succeed at increasing high school students' exposure to college and developing a cohort of ambitious, educated students in the Gary community. This is the kind of entrepreneurial venture that could bring much-needed change to both high school and college and one that bears watching.

## About the Authors

**Amy Cummings** is a research associate in education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

**Frederick M. Hess** is a resident scholar and the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

## Notes

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