



Early Wins for Philadelphia's First Middle College

Philadelphia's First Middle College

Author

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Principal Anh Nguyen-Brown loves her high school, Parkway Center City Middle College in Philadelphia, for many reasons. At the top of the list: “So many students have experienced trauma in their young lives, but they come here determined to change their lives. They motivate me.”

The school also motivates its students.

One big reason is that at age 14, students can step into a college classroom. In 2017, Parkway Center City began its transformation from a small public high school to a school designed so that its young students can earn up to 64 college credits while in high school at no cost. In other words, Parkway students can graduate from high school with a free associate's degree from the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), the school's postsecondary partner, and soon an industry credential as well. Students will be prepared to enter the labor force, to transfer to a four-year institution, or both.

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–Principal Nguyen-Brown



Parkway and CCP launch the 2019 summer bridge program for ninth graders

Begun in 1970 as one of the breakthrough experiments in disrupting high school, Parkway was a school without walls that questioned “every assumption about what constitutes a school, and what constitutes an education,” according to Charles Silberman in *Crisis in the Classroom*.¹ The original idea behind Parkway was that students should choose their own courses of study, and then use Philadelphia’s institutions and businesses as their classrooms. Cooperating businesses included museums, insurance and manufacturing companies, TV stations, newspapers, and the like. But as the years went on, Parkway became a more traditional special admissions school.

Today, Parkway Center City has a new life as it reinvents and modernizes ideas that inspired the school’s design almost 50 years ago. The school is Philadelphia’s first middle/early college. For students who enrolled before the summer of 2017, college courses were not an option. But in 2017, incoming ninth graders applied for a special admissions program that combined high school and college by replacing some high school requirements with similar, more challenging college courses. The school is adding a new grade every year and will reach full capacity of about 600 students beginning in August of 2020.

“I have a two-year head start on college; I am pursuing a career earlier.” –Parkway Student

Student engagement is high; the 14- and 15-year-old students are excited to talk about what they are reading and learning as a regular topic of conversation with their peers. In regard to college classes, one young math lover said, “I have a two-year head start on college; I am pursuing a career earlier. My mom stopped at elementary school in China; she hardly speaks English, and me, I’m taking two math classes now so I can jump ahead.”

Benefits of Early College

The first middle college opened in 1974 at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York. Its defining characteristics were that it offered a five-year path to graduation and it was located on a community college campus, enabling students who chose to take college courses. The target student was considered at risk of dropping out.

In the early 2000s, major philanthropic investment from several national foundations supported the rollout of a similar model called “early college,” the term that is used most widely today. In that model, high school college partnerships were designed so that students could attain a full associate’s degree. JFF (also known as Jobs for the Future), a national nonprofit that drives change in the American workforce and education systems, led the initiative and supported the launch of 280 early colleges over nearly a decade.

One of the most successful school innovations of the past 20 years, early college is designed so that students can earn an associate’s degree (or up to two years of transferable college credit)—for free—by the time they finish high school. Moreover, the vast majority of participants are first-generation, college-going students of color from low-income backgrounds, the young people our education systems have long struggled to serve effectively.

Student Voices

Why did you choose Parkway?

Ninth grader: “My mom found out about it. She went to CCP and it was cool.”

Ninth grader: “What drew me to Parkway for high school was the college courses. I like that I will be able to graduate with both a high school diploma and associate’s degree. I want to be a nurse when I grow up, so I’m hoping I will be able to take a nursing class.”

Tenth grader: “I’m talented, I’m theatrical and outspoken. I got into CAPA [Philadelphia’s High School for the Creative and Performing Arts] and Parkway, but I asked lots of people and, since I want to be a lawyer, they said come here.”

On key measures of student success, early college graduates consistently outperform their peers who did not attend early college, so Parkway Center City families should have confidence their children will do well.² Among the impressive findings across a variety of studies, early college graduates:

- Graduate high school at higher rates
- Complete both associate’s degrees and bachelor’s degrees at significantly higher rates³
- Are more likely to be employed full time 10 years after entering high school⁴
- Graduate college with minimum debt because the first two years are free

Over the years, JFF and its partners have tested creative adaptations of early college to expand their impact.⁵ The most notable expansion, JFF’s Pathways to Prosperity Network, uses a grades 9 through 14 model to build routes to high-skill, well-paying careers in fast-growing fields such as advanced manufacturing, financial services, information technology, and health care.⁶ A member of JFF’s Pathways to Prosperity Network, Parkway Center City Middle College anticipates adding career pathways in health care, business and entrepreneurship, and engineering and technology following the pathways model. Students will have a variety of experiences in the corporate world from job shadows, to short-term, business-oriented projects, to internships.

Student Voices

What was exciting to read this year?

Tenth grader: “I love to write and I had to write 10-page papers for my college class. My favorite book was *The Odyssey*—the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.”

Ninth grader: “I had Latin American Cultures and Civilizations in [the] summer bridge [program]—before ninth grade even started. It was hard. The professor lectured, but I learned some really interesting things, like about the Yanomami and how they hunt. It’s not what I thought about a tribe. And also *The Odyssey*. You had to write your own version.”

Tenth grader: “I’m a math person, but we read so many interesting things this year—*Macbeth, 1984*.”

A different tenth grader, jumping in: “You could be a thought criminal. . . . You get tortured for your own thoughts. . . . They played mind games in *1984*.”

The Parkway Design

Parkway students come from all over the city, and if the number of applications is an indicator of family interest in the model, the demand for this new model of schooling is high. And this is not an open admissions school. Admissions requirements include writing an essay at Parkway, As and Bs in middle school, with an exception for students who have been in the United States for less than three years. Attendance, behavior, and motivation also factor into admission decisions. Parkway received over 2,300 applications for 150 spots. At capacity, Parkway will enroll around 600 students, a perfect size for an early college—big enough to offer a variety of classes, but not so big as to be impersonal.

Upon accepting admission, ninth-grade Parkway students commit to a five-week summer bridge program and orientation, which includes a plethora of academic and social supports; exposure and awareness to college education; academic workshops tailored to the development of problem solving, effective communication, critical thinking skills, and technological etiquette; as well as their first college courses. Incoming ninth graders take summer classes at both Parkway and CCP. Before school even officially opens each fall, incoming students have earned three college credits.

A ninth-grade student described their summer bridge experience:

I loved the summer bridge program. The professor I had took us to court. We actually got to sit in on trials. It was a lot of fun and that experience actually made me want to learn more about law enforcement. The program really prepared me for not only this school year, but what is to come when I have to take my classes at CCP.

During the school year, students commit to a rigorous academic program organized to accommodate their college classes. In ninth and 10th grades, students take a combination of high school and college courses during the school day. The first cohort of Parkway 11th and 12th graders will take their full complement of college courses at CCP in the fall semester of 2019.

Summer Course Outcomes

In the summer of 2018, 148 students participated in the following courses at CCP, with 97 percent earning a grade of C or above:

- Survey of Justice
- Women in History
- History of American Diversity
- Global History
- Religion in American History
- Introduction to Latin American Cultures and Civilizations

Students will still have the critical support of their high school teachers and counselors and be under the watchful eyes of the CCP middle college team.

One Parkway student reflected:

“The overall program itself is challenging because it’s a lot of work, but the school does a great job of giving us that extra support when we need it.”

With this intensive immersion in CCP, students will be able to graduate from high school in four years with up to 64 college credits—a full associate’s degree. While it is too early to declare success, the current ninth and 10th graders are on track to reach the central goal for all Parkway Center City Middle College students: **to earn at least one year of transferable college credit before they graduate from high school.**



Ninth-grade students at the inaugural 2017 summer bridge program launch

Addressing Challenges

Principal Nguyen-Brown is still learning about her students, what supports they need, what they know about the worlds of college and career, and how to manage the transition from the often-undemanding curriculum of middle school to an accelerated, highly demanding high school/college program. Fortunately, she has decades of experience with early college design experimentation, innovation, and readjustment to draw on.

Getting Students on Track

One challenge that all middle/early colleges face is getting students on track for college courses in ninth grade, since students are still adolescents. Parkway's required summer bridge program scaffolds students into ninth grade as well as into college culture and expectations.

Nonetheless, one observation from Principal Nguyen-Brown is confirmed by early college experience: "The first quarter they're getting low grades; they're not used to a college schedule—meaning classes are either Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or Tuesday and Thursday. We insist on quality credits, so C or above, and by the second quarter they've got the hang of it and are doing much better, some brilliantly."

Standards and expectations at Parkway are high; ninth graders take a diagnostic form of the ACCUPLACER, a test generally administered to students entering community college to test readiness for college-level math and English, with 79 percent qualifying for one or both college-level classes.

Partnering with Postsecondary

Another common challenge for early colleges is forming a sustained partnership with a postsecondary partner. This challenge is complex as it includes financing college credits, aligning curriculum across different systems, scheduling, transportation, books, and transcribing a blended program. It also requires that postsecondary leaders take initiative to overcome faculty skepticism about having high school students in their classes. Early college leaders have heard this worry from faculty for many years.



Parkway students participating in a humanities course at CCP in 2019

The CCP experience fits the national norm—that skepticism soon turns to admiration. As Xavier Brown, the coordinator of dual enrollment and middle college programs at CCP observed:

Our Parkway Center City Middle College scholars are an incredible, dynamic, diverse group of the brightest young minds in the city of Philadelphia. They are invested, inquisitive, hardworking, and outperform many traditional college students. Faculty here at the college have grown to love our eager, well-prepared, and motivated middle college scholars as well.

CCP views partnering with the Philadelphia schools as aligned with its mission; indeed, CCP's goal is to encourage a larger group of Philadelphia high school graduates to enroll. Even if a student wants to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, this is a wise option both financially and academically. CCP's class sizes are small—no huge lecture halls—and students have access to tutoring, advising, and the like. Over a number of years, CCP has accommodated dual enrollment students from several Philadelphia high schools, but with Parkway they substantially stepped up their commitment.

Supports for Parkway Students at CCP

Summer Bridge at CCP

- Team-building activities
- Workshops on:
 - Critical thinking
 - Effective communication
 - Problem solving
 - Technology
 - How to dissect and navigate a syllabus
 - How to utilize a planner

Additional Supports

- Monitoring of all Parkway students at CCP, including weekly reports of student progress in each course and feedback for each assignment
- Academic planning and coaching for each high school student at CCP
- Chaperoning students to and from CCP
- Scheduling meetings for high school and college staff to share best practices

The contract between CCP and Parkway required that there be a full-time liaison to work between the institutions—early college leaders have learned that it’s almost impossible to run a top-notch program without a dedicated staff person. CCP provides supports and troubleshooting and is involved in all aspects of the Parkway design. The college dreams of building an early college on campus. David Thomas, associate vice president for strategic initiatives and dean for access and community engagement at CCP, and lead advocate for Parkway, said:

We at the college see ourselves as more than a partner in this. Parkway students are CCP students. From day one, we co-designed every aspect of the middle college with the district—including the school leader, teachers, and school staff. We share in the successes as well as the challenges, and work together to make this model work for the students and families of Philadelphia.

The high school faculty appreciate the depth of this partnership as well. “Parkway teachers meet three times a week to discuss specific students, but to also discuss the program itself,” said math department chair Robert Mastrangelo. “There is a ton of support on our end, but we do have other people that help at the college. We communicate with them to see if the kids are doing well or if they need help in trying to figure out how to get the work done on both ends.”

Providing Work-Based Learning Opportunities

A third challenge for middle/early colleges committed to career preparation is providing students with internships and other work-based learning opportunities, as well as the courses and experiences that help them decide on a career interest. The Pathways to Prosperity Network advocates for such experiences for all students, paired with at least 12 college credits prior to graduation.⁷ However, it is not easy. It requires concerted time and effort spent cultivating employer partnerships, preparing teachers and students to understand and participate in career-building activities, and ensuring the curriculum is aligned with business needs.

This is the next big step for Parkway as it enters its third year. The school already has strong mentoring participation from both Deloitte and Big Brothers Big Sisters. These and other future partnerships will help ensure that students have high aspirations and understand the opportunities available to them with a college degree and relationships with supportive adults.

Conclusion

Parkway Center City Middle College is the first early college investment of the School District of Philadelphia in partnership with the city’s community college. The sheer number of applicants to the school (2,300 applications for 150 spots) is an indication of the eagerness of Philadelphia families to enable young people to get a head start on college.

As Parkway works to build employer partnerships that are as strong as its relationship with the Community College of Philadelphia, the popularity of the model is likely to grow. Leaders in other high schools in the city are expressing interest. If the city of Philadelphia and the school district muster the resources to support additional early colleges—either as standalone schools like Parkway or as programs within already existing high schools—the investment can transform education in the city of Philadelphia.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works. www.jff.org

About Parkway Center City Middle College

Parkway Center City Middle College is the first high school within Pennsylvania to offer scholars the opportunity to complete high school with both a high school diploma and an associate degree. The school provides a secure and enriching teaching and learning environment at both Parkway and Community College of Philadelphia with positive behavioral expectations on both campuses nurtured by activities designed to develop strong relationships between scholars and staff.

<https://parkwaycc.philasd.org>

Endnotes

¹ Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education*, (New York: Random House, 1970).

² Rigorous experimental research conducted on early colleges found that the model has positive impacts on a variety of outcomes, including students staying in school, progressing in college preparatory courses, graduating from high school, enrolling in college, and graduating from college. Two of these studies meet the highest design standards of the What Works Clearinghouse of the Institute of Education Sciences, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education: Andrea Berger et al., *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2013); and Julie Edmunds et al., “Smoothing the Transition to Postsecondary Education: The Impact of the Early College Model,” *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 10, no. 2 (November 2015): 297-325; See also: *Transition to College Intervention Report: Dual Enrollment Programs* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2017), https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_dual_enrollment_022817.pdf.

³ Liz Bell, “The Impact of Early Colleges: What Does the Research Say?”, *EducationNC*, January 8, 2019, https://www.ednc.org/2019/01/08/the-difference-early-college-makes/?utm_source=EdNC+Subscribers&utm_campaign=985951e576-Daily_Digest&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2696365d99-985951e576-254996753; Julie Edmunds et al., “Draft: The Impacts, Costs and Benefits of Early Colleges” (presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, Washington, D.C, February 28, 2018), https://www.sree.org/conferences/2018s/program/download/abstract/2527_intro.pdf; Kristina Zeiser, Mengli Song, and Iliana Brodziak, *Longer-Term Impacts of Early College High Schools* (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 2018), <https://appam.confex.com/appam/2019/webprogram/Paper32981.html>.

⁴ Richard Haskell, “The Effects of Dual-Credit Enrollment on Underrepresented Students: The Utah Case,” *International Journal of Economics and Finance* 8, no. 1 (January 2016): 144-165, <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ijef/article/view/54041/0>.

⁵ The original partners JFF worked with in the Early College High School Initiative were: Center for Native Education; Center of Excellence for Leadership of Learning at University of Indianapolis; City University of New York; Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project; Foundation for California Community Colleges; Gateway to College National Network; Georgia Board of Regents; KnowledgeWorks Foundation; Middle College National Consortium; National Council of La Raza; North Carolina New Schools/Breakthrough Learning; SECME Inc.; Utah Partnership for Education; and, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

⁶ The Pathways to Prosperity Network is a collaboration of JFF, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and member states and regions. For more information, see: www.jff.org/pathwaystoprosperity.

⁷ Learn more about JFF’s approach to work-based learning here: <https://center4apprenticeship.jff.org/work-based-learning>.