



Research campus could house non-traditional high school

By Justin Vick

jvick@independenttribune.com

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KANNAPOLIS - Rowan-Cabarrus Community College is in preliminary talks with the Cabarrus, Kannapolis and Rowan public school systems about opening a unique high school on the North Carolina Research Campus that would allow students to graduate with both a diploma and associate's degree.

"It's another way of looking at high school," said Peggy Wagstaff, assistant superintendent for Kannapolis City Schools. "It's another option to bring high school education into the 21st century and beyond."

Such schools, known as "Early College High Schools," are typically based within community college or university campuses. The North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis has been suggested as a potential site since RCCC will open a biotechnology training facility there in early 2009.

Jeanie Moore, RCCC's vice president of continuing education, said it made sense to explore the idea collectively and leverage resources to see what type of opportunities exist. RCCC already offers courses to juniors and seniors in each system to earn college credit through the Huskins program.

"I think it's very farsighted of all three superintendents to recognize this opportunity and work collectively toward something that could be such a great benefit to the community," Moore said. "We're not quite sure how it's all going to work, but we're committed to exploring alternatives and seeing how we can create an education continuum that benefits our students and employers."

North Carolina's Learn and Earn initiative was launched in 2004 by the North Carolina New Schools Project to prevent dropouts and prepare students for the global economy. Thirty-three Early College High Schools have formed across the state with nine new ones opening this month.

Stanly County Schools has seen success since opening an Early College High School at Stanly Community College in Albemarle last fall, particularly in increasing attendance and students testing at grade level in math. The system recently received the Magna Award from the National School Boards Association for helping students seek higher education opportunities who otherwise would not have the chance to go to college.

The North Carolina New Schools Project works actively with school districts in establishing Early College High Schools, said Geoff Coltrane, research and communications director for the North Carolina New Schools Project.

Districts engaged in the one-year planning phase receive the services of a "school change coach," someone experienced in education reform that helps facilitate the process.

Representatives from Kannapolis City Schools and RCCC will attend the first round of training next week, a two-day course in Asheville. They'll meet with North Carolina New School Projects again for more training in December.

The North Carolina New Schools Project also facilitates visits to model high schools across the country.

"This tends to be the defining moment of the planning process where school districts and their higher education partners get to see firsthand what is possible," Coltrane said.

Once the planning phase is complete, school districts will submit an proposal outlining what their school will look like and apply for funding and resources.

"We're just starting to research and plan," Wagstaff said. "The kids in these three school systems will gain just from us simply researching and learning about this."

Both the Cabarrus and Kannapolis systems will introduce unique approaches this fall to decrease dropout rates.

Kannapolis City Schools will unveil a Freshman Academy at A.L. Brown High School so ninth graders can better connect with teachers and not feel overwhelmed by the size of the school.

Cabarrus County Schools will target at-risk high school students by opening a Performance Learning Center this month to provide students increased flexibility to gain a mastery of class material without the distractions of a traditional high school.

- Contact Justin Vick: 704-789-9138