



## Schools discussing early college concept

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Rowan-Cabarrus Community College is continuing talks with Cabarrus County, Kannapolis City and Rowan-Salisbury school systems about opening an Early College High School on the North Carolina Research Campus.

Such schools allow students to graduate from high school in five years with both a diploma and associate's degree.

The billion-dollar biotechnology hub has been identified as a potential site for the school since RCCC plans to open a biotech training facility there in early 2009.

Representatives from RCCC and the three public school systems are scheduled to meet today to discuss the nuts and bolts of the joint venture. The discussion will help map out the school's structure, enrollment size and curriculum.

"I can't give any definites, because there aren't any," said Peggy Wagstaff, assistant superintendent for Kannapolis City Schools. "We have to face the reality it may not happen, but we're going to work real hard to make it happen."

Smaller, non-traditional schools, such as Early College High Schools, are becoming more common as educators try to curb dropout rates and prepare students for the global economy.

Some 779 high school students dropped out of public schools in Cabarrus and Rowan counties in 2005-06, according to a report released in February by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," said Colleen Sain, Cabarrus County Schools' assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "It's going to take a number of solutions to solve the dropout rate. As we address different groups of kids who are dropping out, each one is going to require a different solution."

Establishing an Early College High School consists of a one-year planning phase, in which the N.C. New Schools Project offers training and opportunities to visit model high schools.

Once planning is complete, school systems apply for additional resources by submitting a proposal outlining the proposed school's structure.

Stanly County Schools opened an Early College High School last fall at Stanly Community College in Albemarle. And Challenger Early College High School in Hickory involves a partnership between Catawba Valley Community College and four school systems.

"We were real fortunate that our consortium was already established," said Robert Daniel Jr., principal of Challenger Early College High School. "Superintendents were used to working with each other. Administrators already knew each other. The relationship didn't have to be built from the ground up, because they were already working on other projects."

But three of the superintendents in place when the school opened in 2005 have since left.

"That's been a little bit of a transition, but not really an overt challenge," Daniel said. "Anyone faces that whenever you change leadership."

Daniel said the smartest move made during the school's development was having the four school boards transfer decision-making authority to an oversight committee comprised of representatives from each system and others. Otherwise, the school would have had to get approval from each school board before moving forward on something, Daniel said.

Challenger Early College High School has 279 students enrolled, 59 percent of which would be first-generation college students.

In 2006-07, the school's overall college course pass rate at the school was 88.1 percent, with 161 returning students achieving college-level course placement for 2007-08.

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