

Sarasota Herald Tribune

Finishing ninth grade with college credits

By Christopher O'Donnell

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BRADENTON – In a precalculus and trigonometry class at Southeast High School, teacher Mirjam Darley asks the students to list "real zero" and its multiplicity for a series of equations.

Only a few of the 31 students raise their hands, among them Coral Nimz, the only freshman in the college-level class.

Last year, Coral would have been considered too young to take the class, which was offered mainly to juniors and seniors.

But a new agreement between the district and State College of Florida has opened the door for students as young as 14 to simultaneously earn high school and college credit.

Students taking the classes -- known as dual enrollment -- can boost their chances of getting into their chosen university. Parents benefit, too, because they do not have to pay college tuition or for the textbooks.

A high school student who completes five dual enrollment courses before graduating would save almost \$2,000 on tuition at SCF.

"This opens up access to more students," said Shirley Hurley, district coordinator of guidance services. "The more rigorous your course work, the better chance you have of being accepted into the universities where competition for spots is increasingly more difficult."

The agreement could also boost the grades of Manatee County high schools. Starting this year, the state will grade high schools on several new criteria, including how well students do in Advanced Placement and dual enrollment classes.

Unlike with AP courses, students in dual enrollment classes are guaranteed college credit providing they pass the class. In AP classes, students must pass an AP test at the end of the class; universities set the pass rate for the test.

Officials expect the move will further boost the rising number of students taking dual enrollment.

Over the past five years the number of dual enrollment students in Sarasota and Manatee rose by 33 percent. Statewide, participation has risen by about 23 percent during that time.

College credit earned before high school graduation helps students get through college more quickly and increases their chances of getting their degree, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

The more rigorous courses also challenge students more, raising achievement. More than 54 percent of high school graduates who moved on to community college required remediation in at least one subject, according to Florida Department of Education figures.

But critics worry that pushing too many students into the classes will water down the quality and that failure can damage students' confidence.

District officials say only students who are ready for the tougher classes will be allowed to take them.

To be eligible, students must have a GPA of at least 3.0, score well on SAT or FCAT tests, and complete prerequisite high school classes.

"It really is going to come down to advising a student well," Hurley said. "We don't want to enroll a student in dual enrollment who isn't ready."

Coral, the Southeast freshman, took the high school prerequisite classes over the summer through the Florida Virtual School at the urging of her father.

"It's very challenging, but it's worth the effort," Coral said. "I get a lot of support."

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