

FEATURE

Bringing College into High Schools

Bard's High School Early Colleges offer a model for students to earn an associate degree by the end of 12th grade

HOPSCOTCH through classrooms in this Newark, New Jersey, school and you'll hear students debate their interpretations of Marx's theory of alienated labor, puzzle over how to create airtight proofs, and ponder how Islam grew into a religion.

If you guessed that each of these scenes happened at a college, you're right. And if you guessed that this activity took place in an urban high school, you'd be right, too. That's because these three scenes played out at Bard High School Early College, a selective public school where students spend four years earning a high school diploma, up to 60 Bard College credits, and an associate degree.

The students summarizing Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* are

By **WAYNE D'ORIO**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATALIE KEYSER





Bard College President Leon Botstein, pictured here in his office on Bard's main campus, first wrote about reimagining "what the education of adolescents ought to be" in Jefferson's Children, a book published in 1997.

More than 45 percent of early-college students received a college degree within six years of graduating from high school, compared to just one in three non-early-college students.

12th graders, or college sophomores, in Seth Halvorson’s seminar. They earn both high school and college credits for this class as they write summaries of Marx’s thoughts on estranged labor and then gather in groups to combine their work into the most distilled recap they can craft.

Those puzzling over proofs are 10th graders in Straubel Cetoute’s math class. They debate the statement, “If water is heated, then it boils.” While some students argue that this claim is correct, the ones who point out that water can get hot and not boil end up convincing classmates. And the class debating Islam learns which groups initially opposed the religion and what happened to the movement when Muhammad died.

Scenes such as these are exactly what Bard College’s longtime president Leon Botstein imagined more than 20 years ago when he put into motion an idea that high school students needed a more rigorous educational challenge. All it took to get from his

idea to a series of schools around the country was an unlikely run of coincidence, tragedy, one phone call, and Oprah Winfrey.

Bridge to Higher Education

The early-college high-school model is timely today, when fewer students are choosing college right after high school. From 2010 to 2019, about two of every three high school graduates enrolled at either a four-year or a two-year college, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The share slipped to 62.7 percent in October 2020, in part because of rising college costs and Covid’s effect on school closures and the economy. For some groups, including men and Black students, the percentages of students going to college have been decreasing for up to four years.

Early colleges can play a key role in bridging the gap between high school and higher education. In addition to allowing students to earn transferrable college credits for free, these schools boost students’ chances of applying to and earning a college degree. This pertains especially to students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, such as students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college goers.

More than 45 percent of early-college students received a college degree within six years of graduating from high school, compared to just one in three non-early-college students, according to a study from the American Institutes for Research. This randomized controlled trial examined students from 10 (non-Bard) early-college high schools against students who had applied to these schools but weren’t chosen, said senior researcher Kristina Zeiser. (Admission to these schools was by lottery.)

Similar studies have shown the same benefits for Bard early-college students. Comparing students from both the Manhattan and Queens Bard High School Early Colleges with other students from selective or specialized New York City high schools, 69 percent of Bard students earned a college degree within four years compared to 56 percent of non-Bard students, according to research by Metis Associates. Among Black students, the difference was slightly larger; 71 percent of Bard students completed a degree while 54 percent of non-Bard students did. In Newark, just more than half of Bard students (51 percent) enrolled at a four-year college, while just 30 percent of non-Bard students in the city did the same. Students also saw a “significant financial benefit” from transferring their free college credits toward a four-year degree.



Students at the Bard High School Early College in Manhattan study a section of the Odyssey about the feud between the sons of Atreus. Teacher Julie Mirwis stands between them.



Students play in the school yard of Manhattan’s Bard High School Early College during recess. The mural behind them was painted by Eloy Gay and his team. Students chose the eight words at the mural’s center, which represent important ideas and their core values.

Bard currently operates seven early-college high schools in cities from New Orleans to Cleveland, enrolling about 3,000 students. And the school model has caught on beyond Bard. More than 300 schools in at least 28 states now follow the early-college concept. While standards at these schools vary, the models are “more alike than different” from each other, said Zeiser.

From Idea to Reality

Botstein’s idea to “reimagine what the education of adolescents ought to be,” began in 1997 when he wrote *Jefferson’s Children: Education and the Creation of a Hopeful Culture*. In this book of essays, he proposed eliminating high schools by pushing students at age 16 to pursue college, vocational training, or national service.

Botstein said the book and his ideas were largely ignored

until two years later, in 1999, when the Columbine High School mass shooting caused many to wonder if the traditional high school model was broken. Suddenly reporters were interviewing Botstein about how to reinvent high school, and editors were asking him to write op-eds. This attention put his idea on the radar of Oprah’s staff. When she put together a show in February 2001 to reexamine the role of high schools, Botstein was invited to expound on his philosophy.

The publicity from the Oprah visit piqued the interest of the outgoing New York City Schools Chancellor Harold Levy. He offered Botstein a chance to create the type of school he had been discussing, with one important caveat. The school had to open in less than six months, so it could happen before Levy’s tenure was up later that year.

To help fund the school, Botstein reached out to the newly

Typically, Bard only opens a school when a district approaches the college and can meet its preferred demographics, meaning low-income students and first-generation college goers.

formed Gates Foundation. Tom Vander Ark, the nonprofit’s first education executive director, remembers the February 2001 phone call fondly.

“He was so persistent and persuasive. He painted a picture of possibilities that I don’t think I ever contemplated,” Vander Ark said. Botstein told Vander Ark that he wouldn’t hang up until the foundation promised him \$1 million for the new school. The gambit worked, and today Vander Ark marvels at how quickly an idea could be greenlit in the foundation’s early days.

In fall 2001, the Manhattan Bard High School Early College opened. This new school, working loosely off the model that was designed at Simon’s Rock, a residential early college in western Massachusetts, developed the template still used for most of today’s early-college high schools, with students learning from college professors all four years and starting college work in 11th grade. (Simon’s Rock, which was established in 1966, was taken over by Bard in 1979. It accepts applicants who have completed the 10th or 11th grade.)

At Bard High School Early Colleges, students in 9th and 10th grade prepare for the rigorous work that is to come, both by learning under college professors and by making the shift from rote learning to close readings of challenging texts, with in-class analysis and term papers.

The college classes earn students both high school and college credit. The professors, or teachers, have a similar split personality; they are Bard professors but are paid through the school district.

“Sometimes we pay them more, if that’s allowed,” said Dumaine Williams, vice president and dean of Bard’s early-college program. To accommodate for office hours and the other extra help offered to students, professors generally teach four classes a semester rather than five, he added.

Cooperation with a school district is key for the success of these Bard schools, Williams said.

Typically, Bard only opens a school when a district approaches the college and can meet its preferred demographics, meaning low-income students and first-generation college goers. Even if these factors match up, negotiations about various school matters—from expenses to class time and curriculum—can be difficult to work through. Bard considered a school in Baltimore for years before finally opening one in 2015.

In Manhattan and Queens, teachers must fit the guidelines of the city’s teacher contract, while also meeting various Bard requirements. “It’s an unusual marriage,” acknowledged Stephen Tremaine, the vice president of Bard’s early colleges.

Vander Ark said this delicate dance prevented the school model from being widely copied early on. He used to joke that the Bard High School Early Colleges “ended up being the most successful, least-scaled program we launched.”

But today, with various early-college high schools popping up around the country, the idea has turned into “an innovation that works remarkably well,” Vander Ark said. Bard’s schools are among the very few early colleges sponsored by a four-year college, Vander Ark said, along with Metro Early College Middle and High School, which is located on the campus of Ohio State University.

“Colleges and universities are usually very stingy with credit granting and typically not accredited to offer two-year degrees. Getting a head start on a four-year degree and not requiring transfer for completing an associate degree is a big deal,” Vander Ark said.

Vander Ark called Bard’s schools “slightly selective,” adding that this is typical of early colleges created within school districts. It’s harder to run an early-college high school with open enrollment, and “that may be one reason



Dumaine Williams, vice president and dean of Bard’s early-college program, notes that cooperation with school districts has been key for the Bard schools’ success.



Carla Stephens, principal and dean of Bard High School Early College in Newark, New Jersey, says the school interviews potential students to determine their interest.

there are fewer of them” among charter schools, he said.

Bard retains control of the curriculum at its schools but must work within the existing school schedule of the district. The college says it spends \$4.5 million a year to hire and pay staff members at the two New York City schools above those funded by the city’s baseline. Bard’s model does cost more than a typical high school, mostly because of the need for additional staff and support. The extra costs range between \$1,000 and \$3,000 a year per student for juniors and seniors, Tremaine said.

But these expenses pale in comparison to what it might cost a student for two years of college, Zeiser said. Early colleges typically return about 15 times their extra expenses, she noted, while in almost all cases students pay nothing for their earned college credits.

Rigorous Studies

Unlike some early colleges, Bard schools do not have open enrollment. Entrance requirements vary at different schools; in New York City, officials require a student interview and writing sample, while in Newark there’s an interview and a

review of students’ grades and attendance from the previous two years.

When Williams helped start Bard’s third high school in Cleveland, he said they began by reviewing student records, “but we weaned ourselves off,” because school officials didn’t think test scores were the best way to gauge students’ potential success.

The two New York City schools typically get 7,000 applicants for 300 seats, Tremaine said. While the schools don’t have final say over who’s admitted, they do set aside about half their seats for students who qualify for free lunch.

Bard officials bristled at the idea that the schools cherry-pick the best students from the admissions pool, with Botstein saying the schools are looking for “intelligent and capable people who haven’t shown themselves to be a superstar.”

In most regions, Bard high schools accept 35 percent to 50 percent of applicants, Tremaine said. “The qualitative, interview-based process is adapted to each region, based on scale and how we are able to access interested students.”

“In each of our schools, the most heavily weighted part of the admission process is a one-on-one interview,” Tremaine said. “We do not review state test scores from middle school. We aim to evaluate applicants based on the depth of their thinking, not the depth of their preparation.”

Tremaine conceded that Bard’s Manhattan school hasn’t always reflected the population of the city, but today half the available seats in both the Manhattan and Queens schools go to students who qualify for free lunch. In 2017, the two schools’ populations were 28 percent Black and Hispanic; this year, the incoming classes at both schools hit 40 percent for these groups. The schools have also boosted their shares of special-education-eligible students from 4.2 percent in 2017 to 14 percent today.

Because the work required of students is difficult, Bard seeks to exclude those who don’t embrace the school’s rigor, Botstein said. “We want to reinforce their tentative connection to learning.” He draws lengthy analogies that compare the school’s admissions to tryouts for a football team or band.

Noting that it can be difficult to ascertain the motivation level of a 13-year-old, Williams says the schools look for “curious and ambitious” students, but “sometimes we get it wrong.”

“Someone said, ‘There must be kids trying to knock down the doors to get into your school,’” said Carla Stephens, principal and dean of Newark’s Bard High School Early College. She laughed and added, “That is not our experience.” Newark’s more

traditional, and higher-ranked, schools such as Science Park High School and Technology High School typically attract the city’s brightest students, she added.

Stephens said the school’s interview process tries to zero in on some key areas to gauge both student interest and perseverance. “If you’re bored in 8th grade, we can help you with that. If you want a challenge, I want to know what a challenge looks like for you.”

Newark’s Thalia Rose is a good example of this. “In 8th grade, I felt like I wasn’t being challenged enough,” the second-year college student (or high school senior) said. “I wanted to go to a school that could push me, and I thought Bard could do that.”

Still, even with motivated and smart students, the adjustment period can be arduous, both staff and students said.

“I’ve had students who were top students in weak middle schools,” Stephens said. When they struggle with the work in 9th grade, they have a crisis of confidence. “If we can get them over that hump, I know we can get them over the college experience,” the Newark principal added.

Students “aren’t used to this sort of work in middle school,” said Steven Mazie, who has taught social studies at the Manhattan school since 2002. “It’s not rote busywork. It asks them to think and interact with text.”

“In my first year of English, I couldn’t get higher than a B-plus,” said Eamon Smithsimon, now a senior at the Manhattan campus.

“I was behind in everything coming here,” said Luca Katzen, a senior. “Being OK with not being the best in something was new for me.” He has a competitive family and said his parents didn’t believe him when he told them a lot of teachers don’t give grades higher than a B-plus.

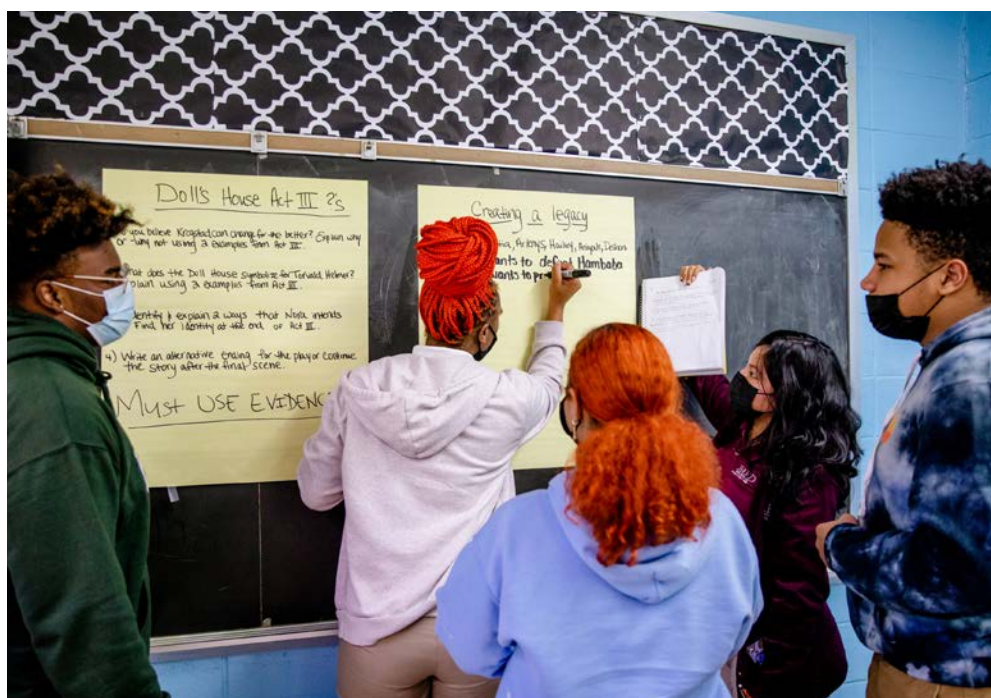
“Students surprise themselves” with their achievements, Tremaine said. One told him, “I hate reading, but I love *Gilgamesh*.” His response: “Maybe you don’t hate reading.’ They have success that hasn’t registered yet.”

“Students are really capable of more than we give them credit for,” said Michael Lerner, Manhattan’s principal. “We think they don’t read and they’re on their phones all the time, but they are interested, motivated, and can accomplish a great deal.”

Even Newark’s principal said she had initially underestimated students’ ability to understand complex concepts. When she

was about to teach Descartes in the school’s year-one seminar, Stephens said, “I was dreading it. I thought, ‘These students are not going to be able to understand this.’ They ended up loving it. They were excited about this idea that you can’t describe something you haven’t already experienced.”

Mazie, who taught at the University of Michigan and New York University before joining Bard’s faculty, said at first he wasn’t sure how to adapt his syllabus for younger students. He said he used to lecture for two days and have class discussions during the third class. “I realized quickly this format wasn’t going to work well [here]. Students were anxious to talk about concepts while I was lecturing,” so Mazie ended up shifting to the Socratic-style classes favored by Bard. Students typi-



Students in a 10th-grade English class at Newark’s Bard High School Early College map out the hero’s journey in *Gilgamesh*, an epic poem. This small group’s theme is “Creating a Legacy.”

cally sit in circles. During my visits to both Manhattan and Newark, most students took notes by hand, and computers were rarely seen.

One other factor Mazie quickly noticed was the greater class time given to early-college students. While a typical college class meets for 150 minutes a week over a 15-week semester, Bard early-college students might rack up nearly 50 percent more class time because they meet more frequently, said Williams.

“Our school year is longer, and we don’t have the big breaks” colleges do, Stephens said.

Bard cuts back on what early-college students must read by “about 10 percent,” Mazie said.

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Summarizing the difference between early college and traditional college, William Hinrichs, the dean of Academic Life at Bard’s Manhattan school, said: “There are more steps [here] but the same endpoint. Every step is more articulated. We ask a lot of our students, but we also give a lot to our students.”

When the Manhattan school opened, principal Lerner said he and the staff were hands-off with students. The thinking was they were college students and should be treated as such. “Let them figure it out,” he said, until staff realized that this method doesn’t work in college either.

Now Bard’s early colleges offer students a wide array of help, from professor office hours to writing centers and guidance counselors.

At office hours, professors “are willing to teach the lesson all over again,” said Manhattan student Briana Previllon.

“Teachers are really helpful,” said Alice Doirin, a junior in Newark. “If I can’t understand how one thing works, they explain it another way.”

Sydney Ekwe, a junior in Newark, shared the raw feelings that can beset students trying to live up to high standards. When asked about a time she got a bad grade and how she dealt with it, Ekwe said she had faced such an experience “literally right now. I had a quiz before I came down here, and I didn’t do well. I went to the bathroom and cried. I talked to my teacher. I doubted myself and changed my answer from right to wrong. . . . I might say, ‘I got it,’ but I don’t get it. I don’t want to ask too many questions.”

Even in the immediate aftermath of this experience, she was crafting her comeback strategy, saying she would go through her past notes to see what she might have missed and learn to trust her instincts during tests.

Obstacles and Opportunities

As successful as the early colleges have been, officials say they continue to face obstacles. The biggest misconception the schools still fight, Mazie and others said, are that the courses offered aren’t “real” college classes.

“Early on, people doubted that the college part was actually happening. They thought it was glorified high school with AP

classes,” said Mazie. “It took some convincing of college admission officers that this is college work.”

For quality control, the school’s curriculum and programs are reviewed each semester by a faculty-led oversight committee at Bard College, Tremaine said.

Once colleges accept that the work at Bard is legitimate, a second hurdle is getting them to accept these credits and apply them to students’ majors, said Emily Schwartz, a program manager at Ithaca S+R, a nonprofit group that wrote a case study about Bard High School Early Colleges in 2019.

“The transfer credits is really a key piece,” she said, “But I don’t think the BHSECs can tackle [this issue] alone.”

The transfer issue is a major one, and Bard officials concede that not every credit earned by students will be accepted by any college in the country. Bard College of course accepts credits from its affiliated high schools, but on average, only 20 to 25—fewer than 5 percent—of students graduating from Bard’s high schools enroll at the college each year. Many other colleges are stingier when it comes to awarding credit, reflecting a general pattern in American higher education. But Stephens noted that she tells students, “Some portion of your credits will transfer.”

Another issue for the early colleges is that growth has been slow, even though collectively the Bard early-college schools now have many more students than the college’s Annandale campus with its 1,800 undergrads. Bard has opened three new campuses in the last seven years. In contrast, P-Tech—a six-year school that combines high school and the first two years of college and engages the business community—has opened 300 public schools nationwide in the past decade.

Botstein added that Bard hopes to open another school with the Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx. “We’d like to grow more rapidly,” he said, acknowledging that other forms of dual-enrollment schools are effective, too. “I’m not a believer that we have the unique solution.”

“It’s fair to say this is not a model that works for every student,” Vander Ark added. “It’s a progressive, accelerated pathway where freshmen do really demanding work.”

A former Manhattan Bard high school student, Albert Rosario Pichardo, 20, now studying at Bard College, remembers “a huge culture shock” when he first attended the early college. He had been used to going to school with Black and Hispanic students, and the mostly white Manhattan school made him retreat socially.

But the schoolwork was “an intellectual explosion,” he said, and now, just two years later, he’s a peer counselor and the captain of the college’s ultimate Frisbee team.

“I’ve had academic success I don’t know if I would have found in any other school. I transcended the limits I imposed on myself,” he said. “I know I’m in the right place.”

Wayne D’Orio is an award-winning education editor and writer.