

## Dayton Early College Academy

300 College Park  
Dayton, OH 45469-2930  
Principal: Judy Hennessey

---

Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) was the first early college high school in the state of Ohio, tenth in the nation, and one of the five most innovative high schools according to the Northwest Evaluation Association.

Established in 2003 under the Bill and Melinda Gates Early College High School Initiative, with support from the Cincinnati-

based KnowledgeWorks Foundation, it serves junior and senior high school students of the Dayton Public School District. The school was reorganized in 2007 as a charter school and represents a unique partnership of the DECA Board, the Dayton Public Schools (as sponsor), the University of Dayton (as operator), and Sinclair Community College.

- ◆ Middle-High (7-12)
- ◆ 80% Black
- ◆ 13% White
- ◆ 4% Other
- ◆ 53% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

DECA has been awarded an “Excellent” rating by the state of Ohio every year it has been rated, and has made AYP every year since inception. Since its first graduating class in 2007, 100% of its students have been admitted to college, while the college retention rate has averaged 88%. DECA students have earned 4,500 college credit hours while in high school, earned \$3.6 million in scholarships and grants, and completed 14,000 volunteer service hours.

DECA is “singularly focused on preparing urban learners from the Dayton Public School District to go to college and be the first in their families to graduate” (mission statement). From its inception, schoolwide educational design elements have been implemented that provide students with personalized and engaging learning experiences in order to prepare them for higher education.

### **Becoming College-Bound Through Advising and Personalization**

Upon entering ninth grade, DECA students are assigned a teacher-advisor who serves a role similar to a parent surrogate. While serving as a positive role model to a mixed-age group of 12–17 students, teacher-advisors assess a student’s academic, social, and personal strengths and needs. They also assist in identifying, establishing, and monitoring academic and social intervention strategies, as well as learning opportunities and internships for students. It is not uncommon to find advisors eating lunch with their students or hosting study nights as a way of providing them with the additional support they need to grow.

Each student follows an accelerated program that is guided by his/her personalized learning plan. Students do not have a predetermined course set for them outside of the core course requirements, as their courses are student-driven based on student need. Teacher-advisors play a pivotal role in helping students set and evaluate their academic goals as they navigate through the gateway process.

Students at DECA matriculate by passing through a series of six gateways instead of through the traditional “grade” structure. This model includes clearly specified learning indicators, which focus on organizational, self-management, and other college-going skills. Students must complete Gateway 1 during their first year, and should attempt two gateways per year during subsequent years. While students pass through gateways at their own individual pace, they must complete the six gateways and pass all five sections of the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) to earn a high school diploma.

In order to pass Gateways 1 and 2, students must evaluate their strengths and weaknesses on the OGT and complete a learning goal sheet and plan, which explains how they will prepare and improve on the OGT during their next assessment. By Gateway 4, students are expected to bring in their OGT results showing passage of all five sections.

Many pieces of the gateway requirements are incorporated into DECA classes and are completed during advisory under the advisors’ direction. For Gateways 1 through 3, students must submit journal entries that will assist them in writing autobiographies and self-discernment essays during later gateways. Students have the option of writing about a range of topics, including family, social, national/world, media/sports, and school-related issues.

Since all students are required to apply to college, one of the requirements for passing Gateway 5 is to complete a college portfolio. This portfolio includes: two letters of recommendation, two college essays, a copy of college entrance test scores (i.e., ACT or SAT), DECA and college transcripts, and a current resume.

While the quality and depth of gateway projects are expected to increase with each successive gateway, there are some requirements that are constant across all gateways. For instance, there is an attendance requirement in which students must be present at school or in a school-related activity 95% of the time over the 45-day period prior to presenting the gateway. Students must also be at least 75% proficient or show mastery for all academic indicators.

### **Exposure to College Courses and Experiences**

DECA students overcome the difficult and challenging transition from high school to college by gaining experience and success in college courses while still in high school. In order to demystify postsecondary education requirements, DECA students are provided with opportunities that will give them a jump-start in earning college credits. As part of the gateway requirements, students must take a minimum of three college courses and complete them with a grade of “C” or higher. Plans are developed with the teacher-advisors, students, parents, and often the college liaison prior to enrolling in college classes at either Sinclair Community College or the University of Dayton. This dialogue ensures that students not only have the academic and study skills necessary to be successful, but express personal and social readiness as well. It is anticipated that for each graduating class, 20% of the students simultaneously complete DECA’s and Sinclair Community College’s prescribed courses of study, which earns them an associate’s degree while still in high school.

In addition to taking courses at the community college or university for college credit, DECA students can participate in a Professor Dialogue mentoring relationship. Once a student has determined an interest in a particular field, he/she is referred to a University of Dayton professor with expertise in that area. Depending on the student's academic achievement data and skill indicators, the professor may suggest a college class in the area of interest and facilitate an "independent study" relationship with the student. While students do not receive college credit for taking an "interest" course, which is taught by college professors, they are exposed to enriching topics such as Economics, A Hero's Journey, Introduction to Fiction, and Geology.

### **Using Service Learning to Plan for Postsecondary Education**

As a way of supplementing formal classroom instruction, DECA students participate in hands-on service learning experiences that will prepare them to become creative and visionary leaders. For Gateways 1 through 4, students are expected to complete 25 hours of service learning per gateway. Upon completion of the hours, students must prepare a reflection paper that focuses on one meaningful site they volunteered at. This experience not only challenges their thinking, but also teaches them ways in which they can be of service to their local community.

Prior to graduation, students must complete five job shadows. While a job shadow can vary in length from 4 hours to a full day, they are all one-time events. This experience provides students with a sampling of different career disciplines and skill sets in order to increase their career awareness and see how their academic learning can be applied in the real world. Within two weeks of completing a job shadow, students are expected to write and send a thank you note to the sponsor. In addition, students write and present a reflection paper, which includes research, as evidence of completing the job shadow.

Another opportunity students have to connect and apply classroom and college learning to the workplace is through the completion of two required internships. Each of these unpaid experiences is customized to meet each student's interests and abilities. Over the course of a quarter, students commit 25–40 hours in actively participating in the experiential portion of the internship with an organization, business, or individual, at which time they receive training and work under the direct supervision of a professional. To complete the internship, each student must create a viable product or service for the sponsor. One student who completed an internship at an engineering firm wrote a report and developed a PowerPoint presentation that demonstrated the project she worked on with a team of scientists. For a team of students interested in business, their internship consisted of participating in Wright State University's Young Business Scholars program, where they developed a marketing and advertising campaign for DECA's open enrollment. After students complete the experiential portion of the internship and the project is complete, they must write a reflection paper and make a concluding presentation to DECA staff that demonstrates what they've learned.

### **College-Bound Success**

DECA is an example of a small school successfully serving underrepresented urban students with a passion for learning and a desire to go to college. It is clear that DECA's "we go to college!" vision is simple, yet effective.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-PEP-11-C-0068. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.