

Worcester public schools push college prep

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WORCESTER – Between the district’s new Innovation Pathways and early college programs and a new introductory course for freshmen, Superintendent Maureen Binienda said, her administration is in the midst of a “redesign” of the city’s high schools that is blurring the distinction between secondary school and higher education.

High school students in Worcester now have more opportunities than ever to take college-level work and even earn college credits before they graduate, while also developing connections with local colleges.

“I think there should be that overlap,” said Ms. Binienda, in part because of the evidence that so many students in the state struggle when they get to college. “You can see the persistence rates in year two of college. They aren’t as great as they should be.”

Providing more college and career-focused academic and support services at the high schools and even the middle schools is also something families want, according to feedback gathered in the past year during the development of the district’s new long-term strategic plan.

“I think parents were very interested in having more opportunities for their kids to take courses that give them a jump on college learning,” said Jennifer Davis Carey, executive director of the Worcester Education Collaborative, which helped put that plan together.

The final strategic plan, which will likely be approved by the School Committee next month, specifically calls for the schools to offer more career-oriented programming, including credit-bearing courses through the colleges in Worcester. In particular, Ms. Davis Carey said, the developers of the plan hope

early college concepts will be “an essential part” of the Incubation Hub – a proposed grouping of schools that will pioneer innovative programs and best practices for the district – that figures prominently in that document.

Ms. Binienda, who was principal of South High Community School before becoming superintendent in 2016, has long been a proponent of pushing college-level work at the high schools. One of the early initiatives of her administration, for example, has been to increase student participation in Advanced Placement courses and their corresponding exams, which can result in college credits.

This year brings several new programs to the high schools, two of which are being funded by the state government. The Innovation Pathways initiative, part of a new statewide effort to promote college and career readiness, will allow students at Burncoat High School and Doherty Memorial High School to follow [a specialized academic pathway](#) toward gaining competence in one of four technical fields: allied health, civil engineering, information technology, and advanced manufacturing.

Another state-funded program, also announced earlier this year, is the [early college program](#), which through a partnership between the city schools, Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College will bring free credit-bearing, college professor-taught courses to high school students, as well as mentoring services and other help. The initiative is aimed especially at students who are on the fringes of being able to attend college – the kind of kids “who never saw themselves going to college,” Ms. Binienda said, but who could be successful there with the right amount of confidence and preparation.

Those two state-funded programs will cost the district about \$200,000 for new staff, busing, and other expenses, according to Ms. Binienda – a relative bargain, she said, considering they will enroll hundreds, and the superintendent hopes eventually up to a thousand students in the district.

In addition, the high schools are introducing a new 10-week introduction to college and careers course for first-year students, and Ms. Binienda also plans to expand the MyCAP initiative, which helps students develop a multi-year road map for their post-graduation plans, at the seventh and eighth grades.

In general, she said, “high schools are going to be more of a flexible organization” now, as more of the instruction and curriculum is rooted less in traditional high school norms and more in college-based content and practices. The goal, she said, is making it easier for students to prepare for whatever their post-high school path is. “We need to aid that transition for all of our students,” she said.

Higher education is increasingly the intended destination for Worcester graduates, state data shows. Last year, for example, 88.3 percent of seniors planned to attend college, up from 78.4 percent the previous year.