

Early middle college program going countywide

All county school districts now part of consortium

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Berrien County high school students will be able to earn both a high school diploma and college associate degree as part of a new five-year

program.

All public school districts in the county have signed on with the Berrien County 5th Year Early Middle College Consortium, coordinated by Berrien RESA in partnership with Lake Michigan College. Berrien RESA has scheduled three informational meetings for students and their parents throughout the county over the next three weeks.

The first is Wednesday at Lake Michigan College's Napier Campus in the Brown Lecture Hall, the second on Thursday, March 3, at the Berrien RESA Administrative Conference Center in Berrien Springs and the third on Tuesday, March 8, at LMC's Bertrand Crossing Campus near Niles. All three sessions start at 6 p.m.

Berrien RESA Superin-

tendent Kevin Ivers said the new program requires high school students to commit to the program before their junior years, attend a summer boot camp, complete high school and college courses on schedule and agree to postpone getting their high school diploma for a year.

In exchange, students will get a head start on college and careers as they

graduate after five years of high school with both a high school diploma and an associate degree. Depending on what they study, they also may earn certificates in a number of vocational fields and college credits that will transfer directly to four-year college programs.

Ivers and Regional Career & Technical Education Director Brian Pyles said the advantage of hav-

ing all public schools in the county participating is that students can still take some classes in their home district and also still take their CTE classes. RESA will handle the program's paperwork and provide support for students and schools along with LMC.

Ivers and Pyles said they anticipate between 35 and 60 students taking

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part in the new program this fall. They expect some will pursue degrees and certificates in specific fields while others will do it to get two years of general college courses done.

"Students can get associate degrees in machine tool, medical assisting, welding and culinary arts and will be able to participate in CTE shared programs," Pyles said. "Students can also get general associate degrees in the arts and in elementary education with credits that are transferrable."

Ivers called the program a "win win" for everyone, from the students who get an associate degree at no cost to them or their families to the school districts who get state aid for the students for a fifth year. The state aid will help districts pay for the college classes students are taking

They said the purpose of the informational meetings will be to introduce the concept to students and parents, tell them what's expected and clear up misconceptions. For example, students will be able to walk in graduation ceremonies with classmates at the end of their senior year although they won't get their diploma for another year.

For their part, Ivers and Pyles see the program as a way for school districts and LMC to provide students with educational opportunities they might not have otherwise.

"Absolutely it's an opportunity to better the community and change lives," Pyles said. "We hear about student loan debt. This eliminates it or cuts the burden."

One Berrien County school district has offered an early middle college program for nearly five years. Berrien Springs approved the program in

2011 and has had two or three students take advantage of the program each year to get college credits and an associate degree, Superintendent Dave Eichberg said.

He sees this new consortium as a good way to expand the program to all school districts in the county and reach more students.

"By the entire county forming a consortium we can pool together financial resources to fund a full-time position to oversee and run the program," he said. "In addition, forming the consortium creates an incentive for the partnering college to provide additional support and educational resources to assist participating students."

New Coloma Superintendent Pete Bush also knows about the early middle college concept. He previously was the principal at Coopersville High School in Ottawa County and that school

and others in that area offered the program in partnership with Muskegon Community College starting in 2013.

He said the program can be beneficial to students but advises students and parents to educate themselves about all that is involved.

"Early middle college is a huge commitment and there are certainly some concessions such as in electives and extracurricular activities," he said. "People need to look at everything before they agree."

At Coopersville, he estimated that five to 10 students out of a class of around 200 students joined the program.

"They knew what they wanted to accomplish and their parents were supportive," he said. "... They gained a level of maturity from being a college student, and it set them on the path to be successful. Some may not have gone to college otherwise."