

Students excited about Early Middle College

Deadline to apply is Thursday

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ST. JOSEPH — Hunter Lange wants to be ahead of the curve.

This is apparent as the St. Joseph High School sophomore is applying this spring to earn his associate degree in engineering

technology by taking part in the Berrien County 5th Year Early Middle College program.

Lange is among the first students to apply to the new program. If accepted, he could earn his associate degree for no cost, and in less than half the time it normally takes.

Most Berrien County school districts have signed on with the

program, which is coordinated by Berrien RESA in partnership with Lake Michigan College. Students will be able to earn both a high school diploma and a college associate degree in the process.

Lange first heard of the program in the fall when his mother received an email from the school district, asking if her son

might be interested.

“I told her to say ‘yes,’” Lange said. “I thought it would be a great thing to do. I’ve always tried to be ahead of the competition. I mean, this would mean a two-year degree in half the time.”

The new program requires

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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.

If Lange is accepted, he would spend half his senior year at high school, while attending classes the other half of the time at LMC.

In the fifth year (of high school), Lange would solely attend LMC classes.

Depending on what they study, students can also earn certificates in a number of vocational fields and college credits that will transfer directly to four-year college programs.

The deadline for all students to apply is Thursday.

Kelly Gaideski, St. Joseph schools' curriculum director, said the program will cater to students looking for engineering technology, manufacturing, medical assisting, welding and culinary degrees.

When students are attending LMC in the fifth year of the program, Gaideski said those students still technically belong to their respective high school districts.

"We can still collect state aid for those students. But it's going to take a special kid to make that commitment," Gaideski said. "Our first group of students are applying right now. St. Joe has a certain number of

spots available based on our size and it will be prorated based on how many kids we have."

Brian Pyles, CTE director at RESA, said they won't have an idea of how many applied until the March 24 deadline.

However, he said more than 100 people came out to two orientation meetings held for parents curious about the program. Pyles said Benton Harbor High School and Benton Harbor Countryside Academy are the two schools in the county not participating.

Availability of the programs and certificates will depend on student enrollment. RESA is expecting to fill 35-60 spots county-wide.

"If we get more than 60 applications and everyone is qualified and meets the criteria, I will take that number to the school district's superintendent and put the question before them," Pyles said.

Lange said he has three other friends applying to the program.

If he were to finish the program, but get no scholarship offers, Lange said he would enroll at Navy to finish his bachelor's degree.

"Everything is included – even the books," he said. "If you wanted to stay in the dorms, you would have to pay for that. More importantly, if you get anything below a 'C' average, the school can ask for you to pay for the class."

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